A MERE CAPRICE

MARY HEALY

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BY

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A MERE CAPRICE.

CHAPTER I.

"BARONNE OLGA"—so called by her intimates to distinguish her from her sister-in-law, the other Baronne de Schneefeld—was taking her usual morning walk in the Bois de Boulogne. The weather was cold; the November leaves, yellow and dry, fell with a little metallic sound at the lady's feet; she seemed to take pleasure in stepping on these dry leaves, in making them crackle under her feet. In reality she was so much absorbed in her thoughts that she did this almost unconsciously. A peculiar little smile, which was so much a habit with her that even when she was alone it rarely left her, hovered about her thin lips; while her forehead was slightly marked by the shadow of a frown. She was thinking of these words of her hated sister-in-law: "The adventuress!—at least there is one comfort—she is not likely to have any children!" and the image of Jean de Schneefeld's lawful spouse, showing off her last baby, rose vividly before the "adventuress."

Even while she was wondering what she could do to return evil for evil, still picking out with great care each dry leaf in her path, Baronne

Olga's thoughts wandered away to the past. She drew her rich fur cloak well about her, delighting in its soft warmth; and she listened with pleasure to the sound of her carriage wheels in the avenue hard by—she had chosen a side path for her walk. "Adventuress! . ." Undoubtedly she was an adventuress; that is, she owed her present fortune and well-being to her intelligence, and to that alone. She and her mother had known hard times—times when husband-hunting was weary work; long seasons at watering-places, with the eternal "casino,"—long winter months at Nice, at Cannes, at Pau, places where two strange women with a fine-sounding name and small means could manage to get into society. They had known the anguish of heavy hotel bills on one side, and an empty purse on the other. Was it to be wondered at, if now she revelled in her furs and velvets, in all the luxury which surrounded her? The husband-hunting had come to an end; she was the wife of the great banker Schneefeld, the elder brother, the great Schneefeld, the founder, the true baron,—and he was madly in love with her, and she turned him round her dainty white finger. They had met at Nice, two years before; his doctor had sent him there for his health, and he found himself at the hotel with the Russian countess and her daughter. He had begun by making light of the mother's title and of the daughter's virtue—the old miscreant! But she had played her cards well, and he had married her. As to her sister-in-law Amélie, no one would have thought of marrying her had she not carried in her ugly hands a big bundle of bank-notes; she was a heavily ambitious woman, and had counted on the rich brother's millions. When he married, she considered that he had robbed her children, and her anger found vent in coarse words.

Then, as Olga was curious, and liked to analyze all things, she asked herself whether, in very truth, maternal affection was what it was supposed to be. She was sceptical of ready-made phrases, of sentimental formulas used by anyone and everyone. She had often read about the ecstasies of love — these she did not believe in at all; in her girl life she had met many men, and many men had made love to her, but not one had caused her heart to beat the faster for his presence. Since her marriage her calm and cold dignity of manner had kept the men at a respectful distance; no one, not even her sister-in-law, had found a pretext for calumny. Now, in despair at her own coldness, she fell to wondering whether a little soft-cheeked baby, all clothed in fine laces, that would smile at her, and a little later call her "mother," might not succeed in waking her from her apathy; and for the first time, perhaps, she regretted not having a child; — then, if she could have one, how furious dear Amélie would be!

At that moment she heard a faint groan, which caused her to start. At the foot of a tree crouched a woman, wrapped in a large black shawl, her face hidden in its folds.

"What are you doing there? what is the matter?" Olga had first thought of going on her way; it was no business of hers; but the smothered groans of the poor creature were pitiful to hear, and after a moment's hesitation she stopped. At the sound of her voice, the woman looked up; she was a mere child.

"I thought I could have got to the hospital, but I live so far away — on the other side of the Bois; and — and I can go no farther."

Olga listened to the poor quavering voice, with its peasant accent, and understood the whole story as though the girl had told it to her; a common story, so common that it ceased to seem as tragic as it was — a pitiful story of ignorance, betrayal, desertion, with possibly death at the end. She felt moved with compassion, with curiosity especially. In her well-protected life of luxury she had not often an occasion of seeing the working of misery and suffering; she felt a little as she had often done in her pretty boudoir, with its warm flower-laden atmosphere and its cushioned lounges, when a storm raged without; the natural inquisitiveness of her nature caused her to open the window for a moment, so as better to hear the howling of the tempest. Morally, she now felt inclined to do the same.

The smothered sound of her carriage wheels, on the road hard by, struck her ear, and she called aloud to her footman.

A few minutes later, the poor girl was placed in the carriage, astonished and grateful. She seemed easier, and opened admiring eyes at all she saw. She was willing enough to talk, and answered all Olga's questions with childish simplicity.

CHAPTER II.

DINNER was over. One felt that the viands had been exquisite, the wines generous. A certain heated satisfaction was visible on the faces of the ladies assembled in Olga's boudoir. The men, who had retired to the smoking-room, seemed in no hurry to join the circle; the drawing-rooms, which one saw through the silver-blue draperies, were brilliantly lighted, awaiting the evening guests. This was always the trying moment for the "adventuress"; every fifteen days this difficult hour had to be endured, and it left behind it a feeling of weariness, which Olga resented. As long as she was surrounded by men, all went smoothly. She was not really beautiful; she had none of what in her world was called *esprit*—which oftentimes is but a certain facility for talking incessantly, and for clothing anew old commonplaces—she was, on the contrary, rather silent, slightly disdainful, and very cold. Yet it was not to be denied that men, as a rule, found her singularly attractive.

Two ladies, talking together in an undertone, a little apart from the others, were discussing this subject, with a crude freedom of speech with which certain women, especially after dinner, are apt to discuss such subjects, when they feel themselves safe from listeners. One of them, stout

Baronne Amélie, listened with great pleasure to all the wicked remarks of the old Comtesse de Vignon, because Madame de Vignon was a real Faubourg St. Germain countess, and also because that evening she particularly hated her sister-in-law. Amélie had donned for the occasion a new satin dress of that sort of green called Metternich, a violent color which that year happened to be the fashion, but which seemed horribly crude in the midst of the silver-blue draperies of the boudoir — a fair woman's boudoir. Amélie had expected that the dinner-guests would be invited at once to pass into the large *salon;* there, the gold-colored hangings would have set off her new dress. She was a high-colored woman, already heavy and stout; she was laced to the last degree of endurance; and even while she listened to the countess, she could scarcely resist the sleepiness which was with her the invariable result of a full repast.

Olga, standing at a small table, was serving the coffee; she felt that she was being criticised, but she had grown almost indifferent to this. She knew that she was looking unusually well. A pinky flush relieved the whiteness of her face; her pale blue eyes, often a little expressionless, seemed darker than usual; but she was perfectly aware that her face, with its correct features, was rather insignificant; her superiority over other women was elsewhere. She wore a black velvet dress, severely plain, cut very low; her shoulders, formed like those of some marvellous statue, arose above the intense black of the velvet, without a shadow of lace to soften the effect, which was startling and magnificent; no woman in Paris could boast of a skin as white or as perfect. She wore no ornaments save a sort of dog-collar composed of immense diamonds, the setting of which was scarcely visible. In her soft fluffy fair hair there was not a flower, not a jewel. She was superb thus, and she knew it. She liked to pass close to her sister-in-law, red-faced, loaded with jewels, overflowing in her green dress; for the contrast made her seem still more elegant and fair.

At last, the ladies having finished their coffee and placed their empty cups here and there, general conversation became a necessity. But the general conversation did not prove to be a lively one. Amélie told a long story about Maxime, her eldest, who had come home from school with his little nose all bloody, having fought like a hero. Amélie was fond of talking about her children; she had three: Maxime, the eight-year-old hero; Laura, who was three years younger; and the baby, Claire. The story of the bloody nose having had but small success, the talk turned upon dress-makers; this subject being one of greater interest, there was a little flutter of skirts as the ladies moved up toward the hearth. But soon the conversation dragged once more. Olga, it must be owned, did little toward amusing her guests; she seemed not even to hear the monotonous murmur of the feminine voices.

At last a hum of masculine voices, with preceding whiffs of tobacco smoke, announced that the smoking-room had yielded up its prey. The men, as they entered, seemed a little embarrassed, not knowing how to place themselves, the boudoir being rather small for the party. The women still formed a semi-circle around the fire; it was not easy to approach them, and none, save the master of the house, attempted to do so.

The baron was a superb man still, in spite of his sixty years; he was very gallant, and women liked him. Every now and then he cast a glance at his wife, and that glance was one of passionate adoration — the adoration of an old man.

A few minutes after the arrival of the gentlemen, a servant entered and said a few words to Olga.

"The poor little creature!"

The exclamation seemed to burst from her almost unconsciously; but Olga never did or said anything without intention.

"What is it?"

There was a sudden silence; everyone was curious. The baron went up to his wife, and echoed the universal question.

"Oh, not much — almost nothing." (Olga spoke French remarkably well, but she had the faintest possible foreign accent; she dragged her words a little; no one would have taken her for a Parisian, for she did not swallow the last letters of each syllable.) "This morning I found a poor creature, half fainting on the ground; I have just received news of her. A child, a little girl, was born some hours since, and the poor little mother is dying, it seems; she suffered too much during long months of privation, almost of starvation. She is sixteen years old, and the father of her child is a fine gentleman; all she could tell me about him was that he wore a furred overcoat. You see it is a terribly common story; that sort of thing happens every day. She did not even accuse him. 'I ought to have been more careful,' she said to me;" and Olga imitated the nasal tone of the peasant girl. She was a born actress; she had told her story very simply, without a gesture.

"She has begun to play Lady Bountiful," whispered Amélie to the countess; "it is an easy part to play when one is rich, and — we all know that charity covereth a multitude of sins."

"We must try and find the father," exclaimed the baron, warmly, "and shame him into taking care of the child."

"How can we find him? Many fine gentlemen wear furs," said Olga, smiling coldly.

"Do you wish us to subscribe, my dear, or do you mean to get up a lottery?" asked Amélie.

"I ask nothing at all; I have told you a story, that is all."

"Not a very gay one, for an after-dinner story."

"Real stories are not always gay, my dear Amélie. But you are right; I ought to have spared your feelings, especially as I make this my own business."

"What do you mean to do, my dear?" asked the baron, proud and happy to let everyone know what an angel of goodness he had married.

Olga turned to him with a charming gesture of confidence and affection.

"We have no children," said she; "let me take this little girl, so that she may never know that she is an orphan."

There was a general move among the guests. Amélie rose, as though she meant to rush forward and cry out that this wicked thing, this robbery of her children, should not take place. An imperious look from her husband kept her silent; but the effort she made to control herself crimsoned her face to an apoplectic hue. The baron saw and thought of no one but Olga; he took her hand and kissed it with old-fashioned courtesy, saying simply:

"Whatever you do, Olga, I shall find well done."

"She needs something to take the place of that dreadful little dog she lost recently," whispered Madame de Vignon; then aloud she added, "and what do you mean to make of this peasant foundling, dear baronne?"

"Who knows, countess?—she may be the daughter of some nobleman; daughters usually take after their father. If she should prove, on the contrary, to be a real peasant, why, I can always make a little maid of her; it would be better than sending her to an asylum. But she will be pretty, I am sure, and do us honor; if so," and she looked at her sister-in-law with a malicious smile which was well understood by all, "why, then we shall care for her as for a real daughter." Then she added carelessly, "however, the law does not allow me to adopt a child; I am too young. The future shall decide."

No more could be said; the guests were arriving fast, and Olga went forward to receive them. She was, when she chose, an admirable hostess, putting all quite at ease, animating the talk, even while she remained very quiet herself; giving great spirit to all things, one scarcely knew how. Her husband admired all she did; he was more madly in love than ever, and was proud to show it.

Yet he knew well that among themselves those people laughed at his passion, quoting all the cynical sayings of his old bachelorhood. His life had been one of pleasure as well as of speculation, and he had been equally successful in both: he had known how to keep, as well as how to make, a fortune; and until he met Olga he had kept himself safe from all passions which threatened to be too engrossing. All that seemed to him now very far away; he forgot what he had been before his marriage, vowing that he had really lived only since that day.

Baron Max de Schneefeld was not an ordinary man. Younger son of a younger son, he had left his ruined family, and his country, which could not offer the field he needed for his ambition, and arrived in Paris without a penny. He did his best to forget the small town on the Rhine which gave him birth, and to lose the German accent, so difficult to lose. He made himself small and humble, and managed to glide into the employ of a well-known banker. In his obscure corner he worked unremittingly; his intelligence, his readiness to do no matter what work, brought him into notice. As soon as he had scraped together a few francs he began to speculate. His fortune grew with prodigious rapidity; for years he lived on almost nothing, taking his earnings, his salary, all the money he could get together, for his speculations. Then he caused himself to be naturalized. He became a banker in his turn, and called to him a younger brother who struck him as intelligent. Then he remembered that in his family all the sons had a right to the title of baron; a title does well on business papers, and in the mouth of servants at a drawing-room door. At thirty-five years of age he was already very rich. He left his humility and his austerity behind him when he took possession of his fine new house; he had to make up for many years of privations and obscurity; besides, humility and modesty had served their time; they were out of place; and Paris began to know the handsome and gay baron. He was seen everywhere, and was as lavish with his money, now that he had plenty of it, as in the beginning he had seemed close, almost avaricious. He became more Parisian than the Parisians, and was welcome in all sorts of circles and societies, where he seemed always equally at his ease. The more lavish he was, the more his affairs seemed to prosper, and he became the object of all sorts of matrimonial attacks; but he seemed the personification of gay bachelorhood, when suddenly he brought home a young wife. His sister-in-law, wife of the younger brother whom he always treated as an inferior, nearly fell ill when she heard the unexpected news.

Never had Baron Max seemed prouder of his wife than during that long evening. Olga, completely mistress of herself, was pleased that all these people who called her an "adventuress" should see her power.

Olga did not, by any means, dislike the baron. His overflowing tenderness was sometimes burdensome; but even that was interesting — as a study. She noted all the phases of this passion with calm curiosity; at times, while at her knees he was telling her that she was beautiful and that he adored her, she would note, still smiling at him, that there were many more white hairs to be seen than when she married him. Then she would remember that as a girl her ideal of happiness had always been rich widowhood. She was in no hurry to realize this ideal; she greatly enjoyed her present life; it was exquisite pleasure to show her power over the rich banker; she delighted in the concentrated rage which Amélie, among others, was obliged to conceal. As she, at the end of the evening, shook hands with her sister-in-law, she remembered her morning's meditation, and smiled, saying to herself that she had indeed found the means of being singularly disagreeable to that stout person.

CHAPTER III.

OLGA played at maternity very prettily indeed. Her new toy really amused her at times, and she chose that others should think her engrossed in it. When she was a child, dolls never pleased her long,—she usually broke open the head to see what made the thing smile; the doll, with the top of its head off, continued smiling—which fact always puzzled Olga greatly. Now, she could not open this living doll's head; besides, the living doll was not given to silent smiling—it spent its little life in sucking vigorously, in sleeping, or in screaming; but it was warm and soft, it had funny little movements, and eyes that seemed quite round, without lashes or eyebrows, and with very little white around the dark blue balls. The real mother had died almost happy when she was told that the fine lady who had cared for her would also care for her child. "At least," sighed the poor creature, "she will not know what it is to be hungry." All she asked was that her baby should be called Marie, like herself. Olga consented; but as she did not like simple names, she dressed this one up in a Russian fashion of her own. Marie became Macha or Maka—of which the French pronunciation soon made Marca.

The young Baronne de Schneefeld was often seen driving, having opposite her a stout nurse decked out with blue ribbons and carrying a white bundle. Many people thought that she had given an heir or heiress to the happy baron. The real story was known to a small circle, but real stories often get changed in the telling, and the version usually accepted in society was that the adopted child was in some way related to the baron—some said, to his wife. At any rate, the little girl was to take the family name. The affair was a good deal talked about at first, then quickly forgotten; for after a few months the stout nurse with her fine ribbons was no longer seen driving in the baronne's carriage. Marca, having had some child's illness, had been sent, with her nurse, to the country-place, two hours from Paris; for Olga did not like living dolls that screamed at night—and Marca seemed particularly well provided with lungs. In the good country air, the baby throve and prospered. There were other children on the place, those of the lodge-keeper; and Marca grew up with them in happy unconsciousness of the laces and ribbons and carriage drives of her first months in this world.

One day, Olga, having by chance gone to the country (as a usual thing she was not fond of rural life), saw her adopted daughter rolling on the grass with the peasant children; and she was half tempted to leave her in a sphere in which she was born.

"It would perhaps be wise," said her husband, to whom she confided her passing thought.

"Better be an honest farm servant than an intruder on our world."

The baron had never looked upon himself in any way as this waif's father. Olga glanced at him from under her lashes; it seemed to her that he was speaking under family influences. She caused the child to be brought to her and examined her carefully.

Marca was then a fine healthy little girl, about four years of age; she had dark blue eyes, red cheeks, and a shock of hair. On the whole, she seemed, in her torn clothes, a superb little peasant. However, the hands and feet were small, and her baby movements graceful.

Olga hesitated during a whole day. The little girl amused her; she was not timid and she overflowed with health and spirits. As to the baron, having once expressed his opinion on the subject, he said no more. The matter was one of absolute indifference to him; had Olga asked for a tame lion as a pet, he would have done his best to procure it for her—providing at the same time a strong chain. As to this little orphan, if she chose to bring her up, he was quite willing the girl should be educated, and he would find her a husband among the clerks of the bank; it was all simple enough. After all, every one ought to do a little good in this world, especially when one could do so without personal inconvenience; it might prove to be an excellent investment—for the life to come.

The result of Olga's day's hesitation was that

Marca was seen once more in the fine carriage. She was so pretty in her fine new clothes that the baronne became quite fond of her, and bought the finest doll she could find for the little darling. Olga still felt great curiosity about her own feelings, and examined them with singular impartiality. She was always much pleased with herself when she fancied that some of the emotions she had read about were waking in her calm bosom. She liked to feel the child's little arms about her neck, and to hear her say "*Marraine*;" she chose to be thus called. Children have very winning ways, and few women resist them.

During these four years, Olga's position had grown much stronger. No one now spoke of her as an adventuress—except in whispers. Her influence over her husband was absolute, and it was evident that he would leave her all his large fortune; that made of her a very important person. Since the evening when Amélie had come so near compromising her husband's position by an outburst of passion, Jean de Schneefeld had lectured her into something like prudence. Jean was not brilliant like his elder brother, nor handsome like him; he was thin and humble, with protruding cheek bones and a deprecating manner. He had contented himself with the dependent position his dashing brother had assigned to him; and in that position, had silently, slowly made his way, and put aside a few modest millions. His wife, who was ambitious, and who never lost sight of the round sum she had brought him in marriage, reproached him with the inferiority of his position and the humility of his attitude. Jean never allowed himself to be angry, even with his wife; but he gave her to understand that all he did was part of a system, and that it was a system which was making him rich. "Then why do you make wry faces at my dressmaker's bills!" would exclaim the irate Amélie. She never forgot that he had found the green satin dress very dear and too showy; he would have wished his wife to be like himself, modest and retiring before the other Schneefelds; but the Frenchwoman, feeling the importance of her *dot*, refused to bow before the adventuress. It required years of conjugal patience to make her understand that Olga was a "power," and that the first duty of man—of woman especially—is to bow down before such. He always added, by way of comfort, "Our great superiority is that we have children; we must be patient and watchful, and some of the millions at least will fall to their share." When Amélie spoke with groans of Marca, "the child picked up in the gutter," her husband would shrug his shoulders and answer, "Bah! she shall be pushed aside; have no fear!"

No modern Cornelia showed her "jewels" with greater pride than the fat Frenchwoman; only by way of distinguishing herself from her classical model, she did not disdain other jewels, and her formidable shoulders and arms were covered with ornaments, the price of which caused Jean, instinctively economical, to groan in spirit.

Olga, at the first sign of reconciliation on her sister-in-law's part, made generous advances; she could afford to be magnanimous. The family life became touchingly friendly. The children proved a great help in the affair. They were very fond of playing in the upper rooms of the mansion, where they could romp without fear of disturbing the grown people; and Olga took care that they should have plenty of sweets. Maxime was a handsome boy, with short, curly, fair hair, who was the tyrant of the three little girls with whom he deigned to play. As he was always coachman, or master in the games, he distributed serious chastisements; his sisters shed many tears, while Marca, the youngest, being very strong and hearty, showed fight, or laughed under his whip. Maxime liked the child, and was always amused when she dashed fearlessly at him with her doubled-up baby fists. He was a general favorite; and his uncle spoiled him, giving him many a gold piece, the value of which the boy knew full well. He was treated a little as heir-presumptive by all those about him, especially by his mother. He took advantage of his position, of the indulgence which his good looks and easy temper won for him, to pass through his classes among the mediocre pupils. As he was not wanting in intelligence, he managed to catch up a bit toward examination time, so as to slip from class to class, learning as little as possible.

School was to him a necessary evil; when he should hear the big door slam behind him for the last time, then he would be free and happy. His uncle's millions were powerless to give him college honors, but they could give him later something for which he cared much more.

One day there came a great change in the fine house of the Parc Monceau. In the midst of a dinner to which numerous friends had been invited, Baron Max fell, struck with apoplexy. The next day he died, without having been able to utter a word of farewell.

Then came the great question—had he or had he not made a will? This burning question made many a heart to beat under the mourning *crêpe.* Amélie could scarcely conceal her agitation. Olga, dignified and quiet, played her part of bereaved widow admirably; she seemed almost to have studied it beforehand.

At last it was known that a will had been made. The members of the family, having wiped away the tears of grief, were called together, and listened to the reading of the document in troubled silence. Olga alone was perfectly calm; one might have taken her for a disinterested visitor, but for her weeds and a certain pallor.

The will did not take long to read, for Baron Max had never been wasteful of his words. He left to his beloved wife nearly all his fortune — twelve millions of francs. As a souvenir, he desired that the one remaining million should be divided among his nephew Maxime, and his nieces, Laure and Claire; moreover he recommended them to his dear wife. There were some smaller legacies to clerks and servants. Marca was not mentioned.

Olga allowed for an instant her peculiar smile to hover round her lips. Amélie was half fainting; her husband, on the contrary, with great presence of mind, arose and congratulated the widow, letting it be understood that he himself had advised his brother as to the tenor of the will. Olga politely pretended to believe this monstrous falsehood.

A week later the fine house was shut up. Olga started for Russia, feeling doubtless a need of airing her widowed sadness in her native land; her mother was still living, richly exiled at St. Petersburg by her prudent son-in-law. Olga felt a certain satisfaction at the thought of displaying her luxury before the eyes of those who had known her as a needy husband-hunter. She had no intention, however, of remaining long away from Paris; probably there would be a little lilac mingling its discreet tones with the black of her mourning when the city she loved so well saw her again within its walls.

But the discreet half-mourning period came and went, and Olga seemed quite to have forgotten the city of her love and the affectionate relatives that city contained. She exchanged letters with her brother-in-law, carefully measuring her tender inquiries after "dear Amélie" and the "darling children" upon his own expressions of fraternal affection. At New Year, she always sent handsome presents to the loved ones. When asked when she meant to return among them, her answers remained vague and unsatisfactory.

Jean was careful to keep up this correspondence, which cost him many hours of work — for he was not a brilliant letter writer. As to the cause of her long absence he was reduced to conjectures. During the first years, the delicate health of her mother served as pretext; but Jean did not put much faith in Olga's filial affection, and when one day the old lady was gathered to her titled ancestors, and Olga still remained at St. Petersburg, he saw that his sagacity had not been at fault. Did she mean to marry again? The thought sent a cold shiver down his spine. What reassured him was, that she had not much to gain from a second marriage. She was too wise a woman to barter her fortune against a big title — she bore a name that sounded well enough; and as to any heart cravings, Jean smiled at the idea. According to his notion, nature had quite forgotten to endow Olga with a heart. Still, the years glided on, and the mansion of the Parc Monceau remained shut up and desolate.

When Olga left Paris, a bereaved widow, she had hesitated whether she should take Marca with her. On the whole, she concluded not to do so, and placed her in a highly recommended school at St. Germain, the directress of which, Madame Langlois, was, fortunately for the child, a highly cultivated and most excellent woman. She saw pretty clearly into the nature of the baronne, and after the preliminary remarks, said to her:

"Pardon me, Madame, if I seem indiscreet; but my conscience requires me to understand this child's case, so as to direct her education. If I understand you aright, she, who is in reality nothing to you, is yet to be brought up as though she were your daughter."

"That is my wish, precisely."

"Was she legally adopted by Monsieur de Schneefeld?"

"No. My husband always looked upon my interest in the child as one of my private charities. As to me, I am too young to take any legal steps toward her adoption."

"Then she depends absolutely on your good-will; should she have the misfortune of losing her benefactress — pardon me, my duty forces me to seem rudely frank—she would find herself quite unprotected. If Marca is brought up like my other pupils, who are all children of rich families, she would probably be quite incapable, at a given moment, to earn her own living; whereas —"

"She will never need to earn her own living."

"That is all I need know. As she grows up, and asks questions as to her origin, as she inevitably will, what am I to answer? Believe me, Madame, that what prompts my question is no vulgar curiosity."

Olga replied, after a moment's hesitation: "She is generally thought to belong to an impoverished branch of my family. It is as well that she should believe this; if she insists on knowing more, you might endow her with a mother, in the person of a cousin of mine, who died when her child was born."

Madame Langlois was but half satisfied with all this; but she had no further pretext for insisting.

Marca grew up in the midst of companions who were mostly foreigners. French children are usually either placed in convents or educated at home, and few ever find their way into such schools as that of Madame Langlois. The price was too high, and no especial religious character distinguished the establishment; Protestant, Jewish, as well as Catholic children were taken, and each attended to her religious duties under the care of the different teachers. The school was like a large home with every comfort; an amount of liberty rarely found in France, and a liberal education which took rather a peculiar character from the numerous nationalities represented by the seventy or eighty pupils. Marca's most intimate friend was born near Lake Michigan, and she learned English while playing with her favorite companion.

As the years passed by, Marca seemed more and more forgotten. Her schooling was paid by Olga's banker, and the child wrote dutiful letters to her dear godmother at stated intervals;

sometimes the dear godmother answered the dutiful little letters, sometimes she forgot to do so. Marca grew to have but a faint remembrance of her benefactress. As for the Paris family, after the first few months she received no token whatever of remembrance.

In spite of this apparent desertion, Marca was in no way unhappy; she adored Madame Langlois, and her frank, gay nature made her a general favorite. She learned easily enough, but it must be owned that love of study was not her greatest virtue. Madame Langlois, whose trust in Olga had grown weaker with each passing year, tried her best to excite Marca's ambition; she wished her to pass the public examinations, which would bestow upon her a teacher's diploma; many girls belonging to rich families passed these examinations, simply as a crowning of their studies; but Marca, in spite of occasional good intentions, did not distinguish herself greatly. She remained very young for her age, showing all her passing thoughts and emotions with most perfect truthfulness and imprudence; she was easily moved to anger, and more easily still subdued by a gentle word; she adored the beautiful, under every shape, had an instinctive delight in all sorts of luxury, and her great ambition was to enter, under brilliant auspices, that vague region of wonder called "the world." She had a passionate desire for happiness and enjoyment.

CHAPTER IV.

"WHY! — there is no recognizing a single thing about the place!"

It was Amélie who spoke thus; Amélie, grown stouter and heavier and more common than ever, now that she was nearing the fifties. Olga was to arrive in time for dinner, and she had invited the family to meet her, so that she might find a house well warmed, well lighted, and alive with human voices.

And verily, the change was complete. Olga had spent the early part of the winter in Italy, and from her sunny retreat she had directed all the changes she had deemed necessary in her mansion. Her sister-in-law's kind offers of aid were politely declined. She knew just what she wanted, and there are in Paris intelligent people, with artistic tastes, who understand the veriest hint—if one can only pay them well. Olga's fancy was to return home only when everything was absolutely finished and in order—servants well drilled, and the table set for a family dinner; she had a perfect horror of anything incomplete: she wished to see the result, and to ignore the preparations.

The gold-colored drawing-room had ceased to be; the silver-blue boudoir was transformed; nowhere was there a "set" of furniture to be seen;

no clock with its accompanying candelabras decked the mantels. Fashion had changed since the baron's time in the dressing of houses as well as in the dressing of their inhabitants. The picturesque disorder of the painter's studio had invaded the drawing-room. The Japanese fever was at its height: monsters of curious shapes were embroidered in gold on the draperies, on the lounges and chairs, which were all very low. All sorts of colors were blended, and all were softened to delicious half-tints, on which the gold and silver embroideries glittered in the brilliant light. The carpets, soft and thick, were oriental with rich, warm, well-effaced hues. Everywhere one saw a strange mixture of furniture: rare specimens from many a country and many a century; Italian Renaissance chests, curiously inlaid, with their carved niches and tiny statuettes of yellowish ivory; in another corner, some strange bulging specimen of furniture from Holland, with its wooden mosaic of birds and flowers; lacquered Japanese and Chinese chiffoniers; a writing desk which had belonged to Marie Antoinette,— all things harmoniously dissimilar. The only century which seemed to be excluded was our own. Numberless and fragile knick-knacks were scattered everywhere, so that one almost feared to walk among them,— vases from Venice, with their delicate opal tints, curious old china; and in every corner one saw some grimacing Japanese monster, superbly hideous, throned in state, like the gods of the place.

No more uniform hangings of this or that color were to be seen, but everywhere rich draperies of cream-white, of bronze-green, of black-red, serving as ground to gold embroideries of an extraordinary variety and splendor. One glanced from one strange object to another, as a child goes from wonder to wonder in its favorite fairy tale; and from all this strange variety came a sort of harmony full of a luxurious charm. Among all these cushioned lounges there was not one that did not invite to relaxing voluptuousness; there was not a stiff-backed seat to be seen. The baronne's mansion seemed made only for the fortunate ones of this world, to whom the words *work* or *duty* were merely words; for those whose only care in life was to make it easy and delightful.

In the boudoir a divan, low and soft like an eastern couch, ran along the sides; on the walls cabinet pictures, signed by the most illustrious modern names, were crowded together. Another *salon* had been converted into a veritable picture gallery; here no luxurious furniture was admitted; the attention was concentrated on the pictures, all of which were famous, and on the statues placed in well-lighted recesses. The impression produced by the house, from its vestibule, with its statues, with its masses of plants and flowers, up to its gallery, which museums might have envied, was that some artist, extraordinarily rich, had arranged for himself an ideal residence.

Amélie felt that there was something incongruous in all this; but she felt it vaguely, and struggled in vain to put her thoughts into words. She looked toward her husband, questioningly. Jean, however, did not return her glance; he seemed much absorbed, not to say very cross. He was mentally calculating the probable expense of all this luxury; and the result was painful to his feelings. The old furniture, newly covered, would have done admirably. He felt that all this extravagance was an injustice to his children. He looked toward them; they were all three running from drawing-room to drawing-room, exclaiming, admiring, enjoying this luxury, without any afterthoughts; confiding to each other that they wished their big apartment in the rue St. Honoré might be changed from its heavy and solemn grandeur to something like Aunt Olga's fairy palace.

Baron Jean had grown much older, as well as his better half; only he had not grown stouter. The cheek bones protruded more than ever, and the skin, tightly drawn over them, was now a little the color of old ivory; his small grey eyes wore an anxious look; they glanced here and there, resting nowhere. The war had been hard upon him; he had never had his brother's talent for doing business in a large and grand way; he had passed through the terrible times of money troubles, when he had thought with sorrow of the fraternal millions which were slipping lavishly through a stranger's dainty fingers.

His attitude during that terrible war had not been very clear; at heart he had remained a German; at the first growling of the cannon he had fled to his country-place, and when, in the course of the campaign, his quondam countrymen had invaded the place, he had received them with open arms, drinking with them, not sparing his very best wines—the good French wines. This generosity had been rewarded; his cellar saved his house. It was disagreeable to him now to remember that time; he was very French indeed once more, and was fond of speaking of his son Maxime, who, though but twenty years of age in 1870, had fought like a lion, and had been pretty severely wounded at Montretont. That wound of Maxime's had perhaps saved his father; his financial credit, already pretty much shaken, might otherwise have suffered greatly from the shock of his glass against the glass of the enemy.

"Mademoiselle Marca de Schneefeld!" announced, in a loud voice, a superb footman.

There was a general start. Amélie, like a hen protecting its young, arose, rustling her silks. Maxime and his sisters looked at each other, and then at the door, full of curiosity, not exactly understanding who was being thus announced. Jean felt the blood rushing to his yellow face. Each and all had almost forgotten this little intruder, who thus usurped the family name.

Marca, dazzled by the brilliant light, remained hesitating at the threshold; she scarcely knew whether all she saw might not be some wonderful dream of beauty. She had felt half-dazed since she had been told that her godmother wished her to leave school instantly. Now, all this luxury, the dazzling light of a hundred wax candles dancing over the gold embroideries, the shimmering silks and satins, the extraordinary furniture, bewildered and delighted her. However, as she saw the silent group about the fire, she felt afraid, and blushed painfully. The silence only lasted a few seconds; the baron advanced toward her — but she scarcely noticed him. Passing her hand over her forehead, as though to gather together vague memories, she exclaimed, going up to Maxime, who had changed less than his sisters:

"Why — but you are Maxime! How are you, cousin?" and frankly she presented her red cheek for a cousinly kiss. Then she turned to the girls, calling each by her name.

The ice was broken; it would have been indeed difficult to be stiff and cold with this simple, hearty-mannered girl. As she was blissfully ignorant of all family jealousies and heart-burnings, she was quite at her ease, and took up her intimacy with her adopted cousins where it had been broken off years before.

"It is she who receives us — not we who receive her," whispered Amélie.

And it was quite true. Baron Jean did not answer; he was studying the group of young people, talking gaily together, and his thoughts did not seem as gloomy as they had been.

Marca was dressed very simply in some dark woollen stuff; but Olga had given strict orders about all those details, and the simple dress was well made and well worn; the dainty lace about throat and wrists, the pretty ribbons, gave a certain elegance to the toilette. She was a fine looking girl—that all had to acknowledge. Her black hair curled all about her face, contrasting with the whiteness of the skin and the healthy red of cheeks and lips; her eyes were dark blue, with black lashes and brows. The features were not very regular, but there was such an air of health and happiness on her young face, her eyes were so fearlessly frank, with so straightforward and honest a glance, that it was a pleasure to see a creature so absolutely fresh, young, and happy.

Laure, the baron's elder daughter, had more regular beauty than Marca; but she had a city girl's colorless complexion, and there was in her whole appearance something a little stiff and conventional. She was the very type of what in France is called "*une jeune fille bien élevée*"; one who knew precisely what the world allowed, and what it disapproved; who had all her actions, all her feelings too, under perfect control. As a young girl is bound to be very modest and even timid, she looked at those with whom she happened to be conversing, but cast down her eyes; she had long lashes, and knew it. Claire, the younger girl, was not yet "out." She was usually considered as very inferior to her handsome sister; she was quite convinced of her want of beauty, and of her general insignificance. This had at least the advantage of making her more natural and easy in her manners; to many, she seemed far more pleasing, on that account, than Laure, who seemed to have been made to order.

But Maxime was the really important member of the family — handsome, dashing Maxime, with his crisp, fair hair, his superb mustache, his merry blue eyes, and his sonorous laugh. His mother adored him; indeed, she was proud of herself for having given the world so fine a specimen of humanity. When the baron grumbled at his heir for spending so much money without dreaming of earning any, she would fiercely take his part. How could a splendid fellow like Maxime, who carried so proudly the red ribbon won on the battle-field, think of casting up figures in a banker's office? Maxime, whom all women adored, could not be a clerk.

"I wish women would leave him alone. I never was adored by your sex, and I made my way in life. Feminine adoration empties the purse instead of filling it — only, as it is my purse and not his that is emptied, he does not mind!"

Just then, this spoiled child of fortune was saying pretty things to this new cousin of his; and it was in the midst of young laughter that Olga, unannounced, entered. She smiled, well pleased.

She was immediately surrounded and embraced, and for a few minutes all talked together and no one listened. Then on both sides came the look of curiosity which follows long separations.

Olga was now forty-two years of age. One was forced to remember, to calculate, before believing this to be possible. She had no reason to fear the dazzling light of the many candles. Admirably dressed in dark cloth relieved by old gold trimmings, she did not seem to have just come from even a short journey. The fashion of the day allowed every curve of her admirable figure to be seen — and she slightly exaggerated the fashion. But it was especially the face which attracted and puzzled one — that face which in her youth had never been beautiful; the insignificance of her features existed in the memory of those who were examining her with such curiosity, but existed only thus. The intensity of expression in the eyes made one forget that they were too light; the mobility of the mouth redeemed the thinness of the ill-defined lips. It was Marca who echoed the feeling of all, when she exclaimed, clasping her hands in frank admiration :

"Oh, Marraine! — how beautiful you are!"

"Do you think so, my dear?" answered Olga, half laughing, and taking the girl's face between her hands. "Let me tell you that I never was as pretty as you!" She said this with careless unconcern; a little girl's good looks were not likely to alarm her — she was far above such beauty, with her queen-like grace. Then she added, turning toward her sister-in-law, "Our children have grown up without asking leave; — it does not make us seem younger, my poor Amélie," and she looked full at the stout baronne, and then cast a rapid glance at her own elegant person reflected in a tall mirror.

Amélie at that moment cordially hated the "adventuress," not only for her triumphant beauty, which laughed at time, but especially for the cool way in which she had, in her little sentence, placed Marca on the same level as her own children. However, remembering her husband's lectures, she answered with a sour smile:

"Every woman, my dear Olga, has not a supply of the water of youth on her dressing-table. Besides, I have had children, and maternity quickly puts girlish airs to flight."

"Ah, if you had but followed my advice — a cold bath every morning! I often add a lump of ice; — then a long walk or horseback ride. That is my water of youth — suppose you try it?"

Amélie, who hated cold water, and walks, and fresh air, shivered by way of answer.

"There is something strange in all this. I would wager my fortune that there is a secret. But what is it? what can it be?"

Baron Jean said this to himself rather than to his wife. Amélie was cross; she also was trying to pry into the cause of this mysterious change in Olga, while she undid her false hair at her fireside. She was decidedly out of temper; yet the evening had passed pleasantly enough. Olga had been most amiable to Maxime and his sisters, promising them plenty of dancing, saying that she meant to keep open house for the sake of all the young people. But Amélie could not forgive her for treating Marca like her daughter—giving her the first place. She exclaimed, without answering her husband's remark:

"This child of the gutter—you will see that she will push us all away; there will be room but for her!"

"She takes after the—furs, as Olga used to say. But do not fear; it is a caprice, and will not last. Olga never cared long for her toys. Yet she is not the same; there is a secret—a mystery. I must find it out—I will find it out!"

CHAPTER V.

A FEW weeks later, Marca, writing to Madame Langlois, said:

"You ask whether, among all the splendor I described in my last letter, I feel at home. I do, singularly so. From my window, which opens on the Parc Monceau, I see a crowd of pretty children, dressed in velvet or silk, with big red or blue sashes; they make their sand-heaps with as much unconcern as though their fine clothes were torn rags and they were making mud-pies near the gutter; they are quite accustomed to the beautiful lawns, green even in this season, to the fine trees, the masses of rare plants, all about them. Well, I also am playing with perfect unconcern; I laugh, I chatter, I wear my pretty new dresses, as though I had never done anything else. I quite pity people who drive in hacks. Then sometimes I stop before a mirror, and examine myself seriously; I pinch my cheek, and say, 'My little Marca, is that you? —really you?' And I have some difficulty in persuading myself that the fairy godmother, who has changed all things about me, has not changed even Marca herself. Yet I assure you that if her head is a little turned, the heart is still the same; that is quite sure, for you are still in your old place—quite in the centre.

"But let us talk together about that same fairy godmother. Do you know, I am quite surprised not to see a magic light follow her in all her movements, like a theatre fairy. I told her so the other day, and it seemed to amuse her. We had been the night before to see 'Cinderella.' She allows herself to be admired, and I make use of my privilege. I scarcely know whether she is beautiful—I rather think that she is not; but she is superb. She attracts, and makes one a little afraid at the same time; when she is with us, no one would think of looking at little girls, like my cousins and myself. She belongs to quite another order of beings. I so long to love her—and I dare not! That must seem strange to you, dear Madame, you, who succeeded so well in making me forget that I had no mother; but, really, I dare not. I am not naturally timid, yet when by chance we are alone, and I long to throw myself in her arms and thank her for all her kindness to me, something keeps me back; I feel that I should astonish her—displease her even. She seems to live in a world apart, where there is no place for me. Yet she is very good to me; she forgets my presence sometimes when no one is by, but otherwise she seems to take pleasure in bringing me forward, in making people understand that I am her adopted daughter, that I am called Marca de Schneefeld; at such times, her attitude toward me is one of exquisite and delicate kindness; she wishes to make me forget that I am an orphan, and quite dependent on her good will.

"For instance, when she gave that grand ball for my cousins and for me, I was the important person—the child of the house. But before speaking of the ball, I must tell you of a little scene which preceded it. You see that in spite of all your good training, I write, as I talk, without method—just as the thoughts tumble into my brain.

"You can well imagine into what a state of excitement the project put all three of us. We dreamed of nothing else; ideal partners and pretty dresses filled our thoughts. Laure was the least foolish of us all, for she has been 'out' for the last two years; she smiled a little contemptuously at our school-girl ecstasies. But then Laure is far more important than we are; her marriage is the great subject of interest just now; naturally, she thinks of nothing else. It seems that it is to take place within a year;—the happy mortal has not yet been chosen, but that appears to be a minor consideration. One would say that husbands are like toilettes: a dress is needed — the stuff is not chosen, but in the large shops everything is to be found, from the brocaded silks to the simple muslin; afterwards one pays the cashier—and the material is sent to the dressmaker, so that the dress fits, once it is cut out! Ah, 'there's the rub.' Claire, though she is a few months older than I, is looked upon as quite a little girl. I think her mother would willingly keep her in short frocks, with her hair braided down her back, until the elder sister is married. She did not wish her to appear at the ball; but Marraine would not allow this, and we all obey her—the baron more than any of us. My private opinion is that he consults her about his investments.

"We were all three to be dressed alike—in white, naturally; only Laure and Claire had some pretty ornaments, such as young girls may wear, and, as you know, I possess nothing of the kind. It was the very day that Marraine found this out, and she scolded me for having said nothing on the subject.

"'Come with me, child; I dare say that among my baubles we may find something that will do.'

"You should see those 'baubles' of hers! She took me into her favorite boudoir, next to her bed-room; the most ravishing of boudoirs, all hung in creamy white, embroidered in gold, with plenty of mirrors, and an immense bay window, letting in floods of light. It is ill-named, for this boudoir is made to be happy in, to smile at life, to enjoy its luxury and its beauty. She caused a quantity of boxes of all sizes to be brought to her; they covered the table, the chairs, tumbling over upon the carpet.

"'Marraine,' I said, 'let me open them haphazard. I so love pretty things!'

"She smiled mockingly, and threw herself back in her arm-chair, which was very low and wide.

"It seemed to me that these pretty velvet cases contained all the earth's treasures. Soon the table was covered with glittering gems, necklaces of big diamonds, entire sets of pearls, of rubies, of emeralds, of sapphires, all thrown together; the sun made them all glitter again, throwing colored lights from one to the other. Soon they were heaped up, and still there were more and more. I could not tire looking at them; I was now on the floor, taking out handfuls from the opened boxes. I had quite forgotten my godmother, the ball — everything. My head was turned by the beauty of the jewels. I had never seen anything so beautiful. The diamonds especially captivated me, with the subtle color in the depths of their brilliant whiteness; for them I left aside quantities of gold bracelets, of rings, of curious ornaments imitated from the antique.

"'So, little one, you are fond of jewels?'

"'Fond! — that is scarcely the word,' I exclaimed, with a big sigh of happiness.

"'Yet I cannot deck you out with diamonds!'

"I quite laughed at the idea.

"'Then,' she added, 'yours is a sort of platonic affection.'

"'I do not know; I only know that I love all beautiful things — that I like to look at them, to touch them; but it never enters my mind that they might belong to me. I should like to see diamonds on your neck, Marraine; you will wear them to-night — the most beautiful of all! Please do!'

"'Perhaps. But we are wasting our time; we must think of you. There, in that corner, is a box yet unopened; if I am not mistaken, it contains some girlish ornaments of mine. They must be sadly out of fashion, I fear.'

"'It was an old black leather box, a little worn at the corners, and it contained a number of more modest trinkets, which certainly had not been looked at for many a year. My godmother examined them all, one after the other, with far more attention than she had given to her superb gems; probably they reminded her of her youth, which I believed was not a happy one; a peculiar smile hovered about her lips, and she glanced at a mirror which reflected the whole of her admirable figure. I did not dare to interrupt her meditations. Suddenly she took up a pretty gold necklace and said:

"'Here, Marca, this will do very well; it only needs a little cleaning. I wore it the first time M. de Schneefeld saw me; — it may bring you luck also.'

"I thanked her, but in reality I did not at all wish the necklace to bring me luck such as hers. M. de Schneefeld was old; and I — well, I mean to love my husband, if I ever have one. As you can well imagine, I did not say this, but I think she, like other fairies, has the gift of reading people's thoughts; at any rate, her smile became more mocking than ever. I felt myself blush, and in my confusion I began to take up the old forgotten trinkets one after the other. I was playing with a slight gold bracelet, very thin and light, when suddenly she snatched it from me, and looked at it with great attention ; then her eyes sought mine. I had never seen in them so strange a look. I was a little alarmed, and exclaimed.

" 'What is it, Marraine ?'

" 'This bracelet is not mine, it belongs to you, Marca ;' and as I looked at her, greatly puzzled, she added : 'It was on your mother's wrist when she died.'

" I rose to my feet. My mother ! Since the day when you answered my questions on that subject, telling me all you knew—and that was so little !—I had not heard that word. One so easily puts aside troubling thoughts, unanswerable questions—the little events of each day so fill up one's life—that I had come to forget almost that I must have had a mother. But now, I had touched something which had belonged to that unknown mother ; it was a material proof that she had lived, and thought, and loved. It seemed to me that I could scarcely breathe ; all the hidden feelings of my nature, all the smothered longings of my childhood, all the passionate yearning to be something to some one, not to be like a waif tossed by every wind,—all that rushed to my heart. I was no longer afraid of my godmother. I wanted to know—I would know ; it was my right. I threw myself down by her, putting my arms about her, and said :

" 'Dear Marraine, tell me about her !—pray,

pray tell me what she was like, who she was, that I may at last fancy I see her in my dreams! How am I to love my mother if I know nothing about her? And all children love their mother, do they not? Be good to me, Marraine!—tell me about her! You must have known her, since this bracelet is in your possession!'

"I went on, scarcely knowing what I was saying; the words came thick and fast, and the sobs too; I was half crazed. But at last I felt that she freed herself from my arms, a little roughly.

"'Remember once for all, Marca, that I object to scenes.'

"My tears stopped instantly. I did not know this new tone of her voice—so hard, so cold, so pitiless. I arose, but was forced to lean against the table for support. Seeing the effect she had produced, she added in her usual tone of careless kindness:

"'Come, Marca, be reasonable, my child. Am I not your mother? Surely that is sufficient for your happiness. Some day or other I will tell you the whole story, since you so wish to know it;—only the ball is for to-night, and we must all be gay and pretty. I do not mean my adopted daughter to make her first appearance in the gay world with swollen eyes,—and I warn you, child, the story is a sad one. Come, my dear, smile again; play with my jewels, be gay and bright,—that is all I ask of you. I wish to be surrounded by happy faces.'

" 'May I keep the bracelet?' I did my best to steady my voice.

" 'Certainly; it belongs to you.'

" 'Will you tell me one thing—only one?—and then, Marraine, I promise never to trouble you again on the subject.'

" 'On that condition, I will answer one question—not more.'

" 'How old was she when she died?'

" 'Sixteen.'

"Sixteen—and I am seventeen. I felt myself so strong, so full of life, that there came over me a singular pity for this poor young mother, who had died at sixteen. I kissed the bracelet, saying very low, 'My poor little mamma—my poor little mamma.' Then feeling that the sobs were beginning to shake me once more, I ran out, so as not to annoy my benefactress by another scene.

"Yet that very evening, at the ball, in spite of my real emotion, I was not sad. I could not be, even though I felt a great contempt for my own weakness. But it was such pleasure to find myself, prettily dressed, in the ball-room, all blazing with lights, sweet smelling with flowers; to be whirled along to the music of delicious waltzes—you remember how fond I was of dancing even at school; to be surrounded by all sorts of flattering attention;—yes, it was so delightful that I fear my head was a little turned. Yet, when the melody softened to minor chords, even as I danced, the saddened music struck at my heart, and in my very laugh there seemed to be an echo of the morning's sobs. By a singular perversity of my nature, it seemed to me that those moments of passing sadness only gave greater relief to the joy of living, to the glory of being young, and of seeing the happy future stretch out before me.

"I have already said that my godmother treated me as the queen of the ball. I was presented as her adopted daughter, as the child of the house. It is so pleasant to be spoiled, to be made much of, that it was only later that I understood that Laure was a little jealous of me. She is older than I, and much handsomer, and the first place ought to have belonged to her. The gay noise and whirl of a first ball make one forget many things that it would be wise to remember. Now, I quite blush when I think of a silly thing I did. In the midst of a waltz I saw that Laure was seated and looked rather disconsolate, so, leaving my partner a moment, I said :

" 'You seem dull, Laure ; shall I find you a partner ?'

"I never shall forget the look with which she answered :

" 'Thanks. Had I chosen to dance, I should not have needed your protection to do so.'

"How foolishly and needlessly one can make enemies ! It is not my dear little Claire who would have answered me thus—she is really fond of me. I fear she is not always very happy at home, where she is made to feel that she is not pretty. For my part, I like her little irregular face, with its turned-up nose; there is expression and feeling in it. I was saying so to Maxime, as we rested in the midst of a dance; we had taken refuge near a window. He is very kind and nice to me; I dare say he considers me still somewhat as a school-girl, but he does not show it unpleasantly; besides, he is so gay and good-natured that one would forgive him many things. I felt that he was looking at me a good deal—probably because he had never before seen me dressed for a ball; I scarcely know why, but my talk about Claire became rather incoherent. At last I said, with some impatience:

"'Do you know that it is very rude not to answer? I have been talking to you for the last quarter of an hour; and monologues are out of fashion.'

"'Tell me one thing, Marca. Why do you use the familiar *thou* when you address my sisters, and the formal *you* when you address me?'

"I raised my eyes to his, and suddenly, without any reason, I blushed.

"'That is not answering my remarks about Claire.'

"'Claire is a good little girl, but I am talking to you about another little girl. We are cousins, are we not?—or at least as good as cousins. Well, I have been making serious inquiries about cousinly rights, and I find that you are going against all known rules when you speak to me so solemnly. Suppose we change all that, Marca?'

"I did my best to answer lightly, but I could not; I scarcely know whether my thoughts took any distinct shape, but it seemed to me that the music caught up and repeated his words. Just then some phrases of a conversation came to our ears; we were silent, and heard distinctly the words of two ladies; we were half hidden by the window curtains, so that they were quite unconscious of being overheard.

"'She is not ugly; but who is she?—where does she come from?—does she belong to our world?'

"'My dear, a girl belongs to what world she chooses, when she has a princess's dower,—and it seems that Olga means to be generous; she will marry the handsome Maxime—that is a matter of course.'

"Maxime was smiling, with mocking enjoyment of my blushes, of my awkward attempts at making believe that I had not heard. I said that I wanted to finish the waltz, and he almost carried me off in his arms.

"And that is happiness. How sweet, how good it is! I should have liked to dance always, held up by his strong arm, with the intoxicating music sounding in my ears. If it were really true!—if—but I scarcely dare say what is in my mind; I blush even while I write, though I am alone; and with it all I am so happy, so very happy, that I cannot help speaking of it to the best friend I have in this world.

"Yet, after that waltz, even while thinking of nothing but Maxime, I avoided him. I tried to be amiable with the other gentlemen, but it was an effort. I went up to my godmother, who seemed to have stepped out of some gorgeous old picture. She was dressed in some kind of pale blue brocaded silk, and wore the diamonds I had so admired some hours earlier.

"'Well, little one, are you pleased?'

"Pleased! — as though that could express my feelings! I was madly happy; — I longed to embrace her.

"She was surrounded by gentlemen, who must have been very great personages indeed, for they wore big glittering orders on their coats, which, I own, struck me as rather ludicrous. Just as I joined her one of these fine gentlemen advanced, followed by a young man who seemed very much embarrassed; he was far from handsome, but his very ugliness was interesting.

"'Madame,' pompously said the old gentleman, 'all your surroundings proclaim you to be an artist in your feelings; it is evident that your house will attract all men of genius, and it is as a man of genius that I present to you one of your countrymen, Mr. Ivan Nariskine.'

"The pompous gentleman seemed so well pleased with his own eloquence that he paid but little attention either to his 'genius' or to my godmother either. I, having made no fine speech, examined the new-comer with great interest. His plain face was illumined; he seemed to forget where he was; he scarcely even bowed; his eyes rested on the baronne with such evident admiration that I immediately felt great sympathy with the ugly man of genius; I was sure that he had fallen suddenly and madly in love with Marraine — and I am very fond of love stories! As to her, she merely inclined her head slightly, but I never saw her smile as she did at that moment; it must be true that she is attracted by great talent. I quite started when she spoke; her voice was low, but it was not her usual voice.

"'Mr. Nariskine scarcely needed a presentation; we are almost old acquaintances. I went to his studio in St. Petersburg once; and a picture of his occupies the place of honor in my gallery,' and she held out her hand.

"'What to the poor painter was a great event, might well have been forgotten by you, Madame la Baronne.'

"There was a moment's silence, which struck me as rather strange; then my godmother said to me:

"'Marca, take Mr. Nariskine to the gallery, that he may see whether his picture is well placed. This is my adopted daughter, Mr. Nariskine,' she added, by way of introduction.

"Mr. Nariskine looked at me with such evident amazement that I felt slightly irritated. During the one visit which he had received from the baronne she had not spoken to him of me evidently — a fact which need have surprised no one save a man of genius. I think I showed a little of the impatience I felt, in the tone with which I said :

"'Must I offer you my arm, Monsieur?'

"'I beg your pardon, Mademoiselle,' — and he began to lead me across the ball-room, like a man in a dream.

"'But you know the way, then,' . . . and indeed he was taking me straight to the gallery. He stopped short, and became quite pale; then, stammering like a man accused of some crime, gave me to understand that, as artist, he had given some advice to the man who had arranged the mansion, and thus he had seen the place 'before the arrival of Madame la Baronne — oh, long before!' If all men of genius are like my new acquaintance, they are decidedly a queer set.

"I had never before noticed Mr. Nariskine's picture more than the others. It is a large composition, representing the interior of an old curiosity shop; a Jew, aided by a young girl of extraordinary beauty, is showing some fine old arms to a young cavalier, who looks at the girl while making a pretense of listening to the merchant. It struck me as being a subject made for a small canvas — dear me! I am criticising, it seems to me! — whereas the figures were almost life-size, and patiently studied: the mediæval costumes, the picturesque disorder of curious old objects of every kind, the singularly vivid and natural flesh tints, all lighted by a clear light streaming in through the tiny diamond panes of a large window, formed a very harmonious whole. As I examined the picture, the presence of the painter at my side had, perhaps, some influence on my judgment. I felt that this was excellent solid painting, quite different from the pink-and-white, creamy, unreal pictures which so many of our friends admire; that the blood might course under the skin. The expression of the faces, the attitudes of the three personages, were true to nature, and rendered, after much patient and sincere study, from real life. It was strong work, yet there was nothing hard in it; the stuffs were largely painted, the figures supple and graceful. I forgot to compliment the painter; I was absorbed and interested in the group, as though it had been a living one.

"We were alone in the gallery; the sound of music came to us from the ball-room, but did not disturb the quiet of the place. Suddenly I felt that my companion was studying me, so I looked up and said:

"'I am not polite, am I? I ought to have found some pretty compliment to address to so great a painter.'

"'The attention which you deigned to bestow on my work was the best of all compliments,' he replied.

"'I looked at it, because it seemed to me that I saw something real and living in your picture. But, between ourselves, I know nothing of the matter. I have just left school, and am very ignorant; I have only my instinct to guide me. A year hence, if you like, I will speak learnedly of your talent.'

"'Your instinct suffices — since it is not severe toward me; whereas your learned criticism might be.' Then he added, hesitatingly, 'you have just left school;— a French or Russian school?'

"'French; I never was in Russia,— that I know of,' I added under my breath; for after all, I do not even know where I was born. He did not dare to question me further, but I guessed that his curiosity was aroused. I knew I must get hardened to this sort of thing, and learn to answer questions quietly; so I went on, with calmness, 'I am an orphan; I owe all I am and all I have to my godmother.'

"'She is goodness itself — is she not?' he said this eagerly, and it sounded like a real question rather than like a mere exclamation. Mr. Nariskine seems incapable of taking anything lightly. You have always taught me, above all other things, an absolute respect for truth; and his question troubled me.

"'Is she good? I do not know; all I can say is that her conduct toward me has been admirably generous and kind,' I said. 'She gives without seeming to know that she is generous; it is as natural as her breathing, and, I think, as unconscious.'

"'That is it! Why, then, she is simply sublime — is she not?'

"This idea seemed to take possession of him, and he remained absorbed in thought. I own that I was beginning to find that my companion was a very strange man, and I greatly wished myself in the ball-room once more. I could almost see my partner looking for me in every corner. At last I said, laughing:

"'I own that among all her kindnesses to me, I place this ball in the front rank. Think of it! it is my first ball — and I am so fond of dancing!'

"'Ah, Mademoiselle! how cordially you must detest me! I am but an uncivilized man of the rude Northern countries. What can I do to obtain my pardon?'

"'By way of penance, you must waltz with me. Do not fear; the music will soon cease. The gentleman to whom I had promised this waltz must have given up finding me, and I have promised myself not to miss a single dance.'

"My partner from the rude Northern climes, I must confess, dances abominably. . . . But this letter will never come to an end if I describe at such length each small incident — incidents which seem to me very wonderful, but which may have small interest for you, dear friend. Write to me soon, that I may feel, even if I am not allowed to see you often, that you do not forget me, and that I am still your little

"MARCA."

A week later, Marca received this note, as answer to her long letter:

"No, dear child, I do not forget you; but I am ill and very sad. As I cannot tell you the cause of my grief, I beg you to pity me, and to forgive me for not answering otherwise your dear letter. I have to give up my school, which for so many years has been to me a source of consolation and of work — that best of all consolations. I am in the midst of painful money troubles. I mean to spend in Paris the short space of time which I yet have to live; and when I have chosen my modest refuge, I shall write again, hoping that your godmother will allow you to see once more your old friend

"JACQUELINE LANGLOIS."

CHAPTER VI.

IVAN NARISKINE stood before the picture destined to the *salon*, in deep meditation. He was a tall fellow, very plain, as Marca had observed; but there was such an expression of resolution and of individuality in his deep-set eyes, and in his whole countenance, that one soon forgot to think about the irregularity of his features.

His painting-room was not one of those delightful studios, half boudoir, half conservatory, with a thousand knick-knacks and high springing palms, with low cushioned divans, and sweet-smelling flowers, where the fashionable artists of the day produce their pretty little highly finished pictures, so smooth to the eye, so meaningless besides; it was simply a painting-room. One felt that the artist was a worker — that he did not notice the disorder of the place, being so much absorbed. Certain contrasts were visible, which made one guess that Ivan had been very poor, and that fortune was beginning to smile at him; the stove was of the cheapest kind, the easel was of plain whitewood, while in a corner was thrown a superb Oriental carpet which he had not yet found time to have put down; rare old tapestries were nailed up here and there, looking somewhat out of keeping with the remaining signs of poverty and disorder.

The picture he was studying was nearly finished. The subject was, as usual with him, very simple; it represented the interior of a studio, not like his, but a dainty place crowded with beautiful things, old carved chests, bits of "Renaissance" furniture, wonderful draperies, exquisite pieces of glass and china. A soft light fell from above upon the model; the painter himself, a handsome young man in modern velvet jacket, was concentrating all his attention on a miniature canvas; and one felt, merely by looking at his way of holding his brush, that the tiny picture would be smoothly painted, pink and white and pretty and porcelain-like. The model, a very young girl, was marvellously rendered. She was performing her part conscientiously. She seemed a little benumbed with the long sitting, and somewhat cold; the flesh-tints were exquisite and scrupulously true to nature. On the pretty, delicate, somewhat sickly face was written the poor child's story. She deserved a better fate than that which had fallen to her; she blushed to show herself thus. She was still so young that she had not grown hardened. But her mother had made a model of her, and how could she resist? Not far from the young girl sat this mother, knitting in hand. Here "realism," in the fullest sense of the word, reigned supreme; this woman also told her story; everything was studied and observed, from the common shawl tied behind the waist to the wrinkles on the sordid face.

Ivan had put into this picture all the passion and power of his nature. The three figures, half-size, stood out from all the rest; but the accessories had been treated with scrupulous care, and it had required all his firmness to keep them well in the background. A certain corner of his picture, lost in the shade, had given him weeks of hard work, and merely served as a sombre tone in the general harmony. He was not ill-pleased with the result. Thus far he had never succeeded so well in subduing his talent, in making it serve his idea. The original roughness and violence of his painting was softened down to harmony; the abrupt changes from intense black to crude light, which had distinguished his earlier attempts, no longer shocked the eye; he was beginning to be master in the creamy whites, the delicate half-tints, without which painting remains ever crude and incomplete.

While examining his work, he thought of the painful years which now lay far behind him; of the struggle not only with his circumstances but with his talent. He well remembered his first attempts — the rough sketches, hard and crude. He seemed yet to hear the reproaches of his widowed mother; she was very poor when he chose a profession which, according to her, was one which nine times out of ten led to the poor-house, whereas he might have obtained, with some good recommendations, the position of government clerk which his father had filled — it was not brilliant, but it gave one bread, at least. Oh, those hard and cruel years of waiting! It needed a great faith in oneself not to succumb; how could he persuade others that in those rough and ugly sketches lay the germ of original talent? At times he himself doubted. At last, a great personage, one who sought to encourage all native talent, procured for the young painter a small yearly allowance, and sent him to study in the French schools. The dreams of success and glory with which he first trod the Paris streets soon vanished. A stranger remains long a stranger in the great city. Sometimes, fashion having spoken, the very title of stranger becomes a mark of distinction and great favor; but that is a very rare case, and until fashion deigns to speak, the intruder has great difficulty in forcing his way,— there are so many before him, and the spirit of caste is such that the unlucky foreigner is made to understand that not being born under the French sky is a crime for which he must do penance.

He lived the life of a hermit, working with a sort of rage. Like a singer whose voice is powerful but hard to manage, he had to work more than his fellows, and for less brilliant results. All the joys of youth were denied to this awkward, shy man, who did not know how to snatch them and make them his. Women laughed and turned aside as he silently went his way. In Russia — where he returned, the patience of his patron having given way — success at last came to him. A picture — the one now in Baronne Olga's possession — obtained a medal at a Paris exhibition, and suddenly his countrymen discovered that he had talent; then . . .

A knock at the door interrupted his meditations. "Come in!" he cried, without turning around: as he received few visits save those of models in search of work.

There was a slight hesitation; then came a pretty rustle of silks and long skirts. He turned quickly, and half staggered; an instant later he was at the side of the woman who had entered, kissing her hands, with adoration in his eyes.

It was the Baronne Olga de Schneefeld. She laughed at him, though she was moved, and felt happy to know that she was capable of so real an emotion. They sat down side by side.

"It is so long since I have seen you," he said.

"And do you count last evening as nothing?"

"That was cruel torture — nothing else. To see you in the midst of your splendor, surrounded by those brainless men, who had as much right as I myself to look upon your beauty, to approach you, to speak to you, lost in that crowd, I suffered horribly. Ah, Olga! — how I hated your millions! — how I wished to tear the diamonds from your neck! — how I longed to make you poor, as I am, for then at last you would be mine — my wife!"

"You are ungrateful, Ivan; pray speak of my millions with more respect. I myself do not despise them. Without their aid, would I, on a certain day, have gone boldly to a painter's studio to purchase his best picture? My poor Ivan, what a sad-looking fellow you were in those days! how ill-combed, too!" She was trying to laugh him out of his sombre mood; but he repeated:

"But for your fortune, I might have married you."

"Bah! Marriage has its prosaic side — especially when it is accompanied with that poverty which you seem to prize, as others prize wealth. Fancy me, mending your socks, wrapped in a cheap dressing-gown, and groaning over the butcher's bills! Believe me, dear friend, you are too much of an artist not to appreciate the accessories of a picture. You always see me at my best; I choose to make myself beautiful for you alone; and in loving me, you love many things without knowing that you do so. Besides," she added, caressingly, "since you know that I love you . . ."

She could do with him what she chose. A glance of hers made him half-mad with love.

"Stay," whispered he.

"Not to-day; Marca and Clare are waiting for me in the carriage."

Ivan started to his feet.

"They are down-stairs?—they know that you are here? But that is madness!"

"The very reverse—so that I do not stay too long. Women usually are lost through too much prudence. In my case, everything is simple and easily explained. A friend presents a painter of talent . . . dear me, Ivan, what a poor actor you are! . . . Having already a work of his, I desire to have another for my gallery. I have a fancy, which he is to execute; instead of ordinary portraits, I mean to have a picture representing a modern interior, such as he knows so well how to paint; and we—my adopted daughter and myself—will serve as models. I go to his studio to speak of this, invite him to dinner—it is for Tuesday—and thus, quietly and naturally, the great painter becomes the friend of the family. The picture will not be finished when summer comes, and in order to work in peace and quiet, the artist accompanies us when we go to the country. Can anything be more simple?"

"To see you always surrounded by others! . . . I am, as you say, so poor an actor! Last night I came near betraying myself to that little girl." Then he abruptly added: "Who and what is she?"

"An orphan."

"You never spoke to me of her."

"I am not given to talk of my different charities. Then, to tell the truth, having given orders to have all her bills paid, I had pretty nearly forgotten her. Does she displease you?"

"All who have a right to love you, to live near you, are my natural enemies. Are you fond of her?"

"I? — oh, dear, no, not particularly. She amuses me, like the others. I pull a string, and my puppets dance for my pleasure. I was born a looker-on. I even like to give myself the spectacle of my own feelings — and I assure you that the spectacle is a curious one sometimes."

Then, rising, she sauntered up to his picture.

"You have worked hard since Florence. It is your masterpiece."

"I want you to be proud of me."

"And I shall not be satisfied until those vain Frenchmen bow down to you, as to a master. You have what they have not — truth."

She made some slight criticisms — the criticisms of a woman of taste who knew all the weak points of her painter. Then she turned toward the door.

"Already?"

"I have been here half an hour, at least; and Marca said to me: 'Take care, Marraine!— that painter is in love with you.' If I stay longer, she will be convinced of the fact."

"Do you love me, Olga,— or is my adoration for you merely a subject of philosophical curiosity?"

She did not answer; but turning toward him, she looked him in the eyes, smiling with an adorable smile. He was satisfied.

Baron Jean had guessed aright. There was a secret in his sister-in-law's life, but a secret so well guarded that, so far, none had even suspected the truth.

CHAPTER VII.

"CONFESS that you hate me for keeping you here against your will, Miss Marca."

Ivan was making a sketch of the young girl, and had been so absorbed and interested that he had scarcely before noticed her very visible impatience. Artists are often pitiless. Marca was greatly bored; she stood first on one foot, then on the other, turned her head, gave a little sigh, twisted her neck so as to catch a glimpse of a group at the other side of the winter garden, and finally began to hum a ballet air which she had heard the night before at the opera;— in one word, she might have been charming as a young lady, but as a model she was simply detestable. Ivan, who was beginning to "see" his picture, had already made a number of pencil sketches from each of his sitters; he had become an everyday guest at the house.

"Hate you?— well, let us put it a little more mildly. I only wish you were not an artist — or that I were not your sitter."

She said this with a spoiled child's pout, which made him smile. She was terribly frank; it amused Olga, so that she felt encouraged to say all that passed through her head. She was considered by Amélie and her elder daughter a very ill-behaved girl; her way of looking fearlessly at those with whom she conversed, even gentlemen, greatly shocked the stout baronne.

"From the very first time I met you, I have been unfortunate, and spoiled some pleasure of yours."

"I have forgiven that lost dance of mine, long ago; but this last offence — making me stand here for an hour or two while the others are laughing over yonder — is more serious. I have a great mind to make you waltz with me again, by way of penance; the absence of music would not embarrass you, as you have no idea of time or tune,— and, at any rate, while making your feet work, your hands would be at peace — and the sitting would be over."

"One single instant;— saying disagreeable things to me gives you such an adorable expression of malicious pleasure that I must profit by the occasion."

"Oh, in that case I shall become sweet and amiable!"

"That is so little in your way that you would not know how to begin."

Olga, having left the other group just in time to hear the last remarks, looked over the artist's shoulder to see what he was doing, and said smilingly:

"I am afraid, Mr. Nariskine, that I have given you an impossible task; this impertinent child cannot keep still a moment."

"She has already acknowledged her frank

aversion to the artist, so the artist gives her permission to leave him."

"Really?—I may go?" and scarcely waiting for the desired answer, she darted away toward the other young people, and soon her gay laugh was heard mingling with that of Maxime.

Olga seated herself near her painter, and seemed to take great interest in the sketches which he spread on the table between them.

This large conservatory, or rather winter garden, as it was called, formed the most exquisite studio that an artist could dream of. The soft diffused light gave great value to the delicate flesh tints, without any harsh shadows. Then the place itself was a marvel of tropical beauty. In the centre, a superb palm tree spread its huge leaves up to the glass roof;—the conservatory was immensely high; small serpentine alleys wound in and out of this nest of southern verdure, making the place seem very large; there was as little apparent symmetry as possible; it was a fanciful dream of beauty,—here, a mass of flowering camellia bushes stopped the way; there, low plants, such as begonias, with blood-stained leaves, dracæna, that seemed cut out of some metal, allowed one to see beyond a tiny gurgling fountain, the water of which dripped from a rock and fell on large-leaved nenuphars; the edge of the fountain was hidden by various kinds of grasses, dotted with the tiniest of flowerets, with maiden-hair and many-tinted mosses.

Ivan Nariskine never began a picture without having thought long and deeply. He hesitated for weeks before making up his mind, trying many combinations of figures, many arrangements of background, before deciding; then, at last, when his plan quite satisfied him, he went boldly enough to work, all hesitation being quite put aside. The family picture which Olga had imagined, and which had served as a pretext for bringing Ivan into the intimacy of her household, gave him even more trouble than usual. She wished to surround herself with all her young people; she would not exclude her brother-in-law's children from the group, even while she required that Marca should, there as elsewhere, occupy the first place, after herself. The picture was to represent a tea-party in the conservatory; but the grouping of the figures was not yet decided upon.

Perhaps Ivan did not care to make up his mind too rapidly. His picture for the Spring exhibition was quite finished, and he had taken a dislike to his bare, cold painting-room. He spent a great part of each day in this delicious winter garden, which seemed to him a very paradise on earth ; his conscience was at peace, since each day he made some sketch, some pencil drawing from one or another of his sitters. He was beginning to be a rather better actor, and no one seemed to suspect the truth —not even Baron Jean, who watched his sister-in-law with curious eyes. Ivan's fierce pride insensibly softened down, in the luxurious hot-house atmosphere. The strong odor of all these exotic plants, of all these rich, strange flowers, mingled together in the moist heat of the place, acted little by little on the nerves, and produced a sort of intoxication, which caused him to speak low, with slower intonations than usual; and the things thus whispered in the ear of a loved woman took something of the soft voluptuousness of the place.

"We do not disturb you?—No? . . . I was told you were here, and my little Zeé and I know the way; we left your solemn footman in the lurch. . . . How much better to sit here than in-doors! A corner of the tropics under our sad northern skies!—who was it said that the other day? I have such a poor memory! . . . How are you, dear baronne? But I need not ask;—no, really you are so lovely that you must allow me to embrace you! Anyone so beautiful as you has done her duty to her country—as they say of women with a dozen children. . . . But talking of children, where are your young people? Ah! yes, I see them over yonder with the handsome Maxime. Come, Laure, Marca, Claire, come here!"

It would be difficult to give an idea of the rapidity with which this torrent of words fell from the visitor's lips. Olga had started when the Countess de Vignon had burst into the garden; but she had quickly regained her composure. Madame de Vignon, beside being very nearsighted, was so absolutely engrossed with her dear person, her surprising toilette, her little girl, and even her husband, who meekly followed at the distance imposed upon him by his wife's gorgeous train, that she was incapable of noticing much beside. And after all, an artistic consultation about the much-talked-of picture was a most natural thing. While Madame de Vignon and her husband were shaking hands with all the young people, little Zeé—a delicious three-year-old baby, with long golden fluffy hair — having, with the sagacity of her age, discovered a plate of cakes on the little table, reached up for them.

"That is what we need — what I have been trying to find as a connecting link between my two groups," said Nariskine, drawing Olga's attention to the child. Quickly taking up his sketch-book, he dashed in the little figure. Zeé, much absorbed in her one thought, found herself too small to get at the sweets; she was on tip-toe, and had almost succeeded, when the slight table against which she leaned too heavily suddenly tipped over, and drawing, cakes, table, baby and all, rolled together on the floor. There was no great harm done, as Miss Zeé was unhurt ; she was soon installed among the ruins, wetting the cakes with her tears, and eating them between her sobs.

"Ah, Mr. Nariskine, how true your artist's instinct is!" the delighted mother rattled on volubly. "Your picture would not be complete without a child in it! Do you know, our forefathers did not understand the dear little creatures ; we do. Everything now is done for the children. See how we dote on them, how we dress them ! Our best authors write for them, our best artists paint them. Carolus Duran really persecutes me about a big portrait of my Zeé, which he wants to paint for the *salon.* Is she not adorable — the little darling! Well, it seems I was just like her at that age! " Then, in a changed voice, she called out warningly: " M. de Vignon! "

M. de Vignon, whose usual occupation was the sucking of his cane-knob while he listened to his wife's eternal talk, had moved aside and was making Laure laugh under her breath.

" What, my dear ? " mildly answered the well-disciplined husband. " I was not saying anything at all improper, was I, Miss Laure ? Oh, I am not dangerous! I am a model husband. A little more, and my wife would lead me about by a string — you know, a dear little string fastened to a dear little collar on which one might read, ' Maurice, belonging to the Countess de Vignon, such a street, such a number '; you will see that she will come to it."

The count, perhaps by way of contrast to his wife, spoke very slowly; he always imitated what he thought was English style, so much so that he had almost acquired a British accent, and cultivated a hesitation in his speech. He always carried a square glass in one eye — not that he was at all near-sighted, but because he thought that was necessary to the general "get-up," as were also the English clothes and the jockey pin in his cravat. M. de Vignon had led a terribly dissipated life in his day; and his mother — who, for the relief of her friends, had at last been gathered to her ancestors,— had found a wife for him in the person of a tradesman's daughter, whose greatest idea of human bliss was to forget the paternal shop and play at being countess. The gay Maurice, being quite ruined, had submitted to the inevitable, promising himself, however, that he would form his wife; but it soon became evident that he was quite under the unaristocratic thumb of this turbulent, obstinate, narrow-minded, thin-natured little woman. The young countess, who did not disdain to employ domestic spies, discovered certain irregularities in her lord's private life; and finally, after he had made some pretty heavy debts, bought up all his bills, paying the creditors up to the last farthing. She loved her money, but she loved power more. Maurice was at her mercy; she was his one creditor, and she took advantage of this admirable position to put the key of the money-box in her apron pocket. From that day the poor ex-Lothario was conquered. She did as all great generals try to do: she cut off the supplies, and the besieged enemy had to surrender or starve. He surrendered. Lothario became a model husband; he played with his children, and paid visits with his wife.

The party broke up a little as the guests sauntered through the lovely winter garden. Baron Jean and his wife had joined the rest of the family. Little by little various groups were formed; and, as often happened on such occasions, Maxime and Marca left the others, to take a side path. The young man, though he had no intention of falling in love with this "little girl," liked well enough to talk and laugh with her. As to Marca, like all very innocent and honest-minded girls, she saw the future unfold before her like a pretty love-story, ending with marriage bells. Maxime seemed placed near her by a kind Providence on purpose that she might love him; and, loving him, it was very natural that some day he should be her husband.

"What are you thinking about, little cousin?"

Marca, usually talkative, like a merry child that she was, sometimes had fits of silence which said more than mere words: she had not yet acquired the society art of talking for the sake of talking. They were in the most ravishing nook of the conservatory; great bamboos, palm-trees with their wide leaves tangled one in the other, masked the view; while the tiny fountain, hidden in the foliage, murmured hard by. The voices were dying away; for Olga had invited her friends to take five o'clock tea, English fashion, in the drawing-room.

"I was thinking," answered Marca, softly, "that the garden of Eden must have looked like this."

"Do I personate Adam, my pretty Eve?" It was so very commonplace a remark that it meant nothing at all; but Marca nevertheless felt the hot blood rush up to the very roots of her hair. Maxime, who did not wish to have anything he said taken too much at heart, continued, in a light and joking way: "But you will not do for Eve at all; you have dark, curly, rebellious hair, whereas our painters, who, of course, are in the secret of the past, represent Eve as fair. Can you imagine why all ideas of innocence are associated with blue eyes and tow-colored hair? If I were a painter, and wanted to represent a perfect image of innocence, of ignorance of all naughty things, past, present, or to come, I should paint you as you stood there just now, with your eyes uplifted, thinking of that paradise which perhaps never existed. Do you know that your absolute and trustful innocence, your extreme frankness, are —just terrible!"

"Terrible?"

"Yes, terrible; you seem to expect all, even poor fellows like myself, to be as good as you are. You go on with your gay fearlessness, taking it for granted that all things are simple and easy in this life, of which you have never seen but the gilded exterior; you never ask yourself what lies beneath the gilding."

"I do not understand you; I am happy—that is all my secret. Just think of it; my story is like a fairy tale. I am—I know not what. I feel that I am protected by some magical power, and that I have but to let myself be led from one enchantment to another. I scarcely have time to form a wish; for all my desires, all my caprices even, are satisfied at once. I am Fortune's child; everyone spoils me—and I so like to be spoiled! It is the very excess of happiness which gives me that sort of fearlessness which you have noticed in me, and which . . . displeases you?" There was a little hesitation in the questioning voice, which said plainly, "Tell me what you wish me to be."

Maxime was touched. It was really very charming to be loved thus innocently and entirely. Marca was the first young girl whom he had ever known intimately, French life not giving much opportunity for such friendships; and he found in it a singular and unexpected charm.

"It does not displease me at all; quite the contrary," and taking both her hands, he pressed them to his lips. Maxime never could find himself alone with a woman, young and pretty, without making love to her. Can one change one's nature?

Marca turned quite pale, and turned to go toward the house.

"Everyone is asking for you!" The Baronne Amélie stood before them, eyeing them like culprits; she had witnessed the little scene of the hand-kissing, and her small eyes glowed fiercely. Marca, though she was terribly frightened, tried to say lightly:

"We were just going to join you all at the tea-table—I love tea! Will you take my arm, dear aunt?"

"Thanks; I wish to speak to Maxime;" and the "dear aunt" turned her back on the girl. Marca left the mother and son together, guessing that there would be a "scene."

"What is it, mother?" said Maxime, rather sulkily contemplating his irate parent.

"It shall not be! Do you hear?—it shall not be! Your father is nursing I scarcely know what ridiculous and romantic scheme; but I will not allow it; this child of the gutter shall never sit at my table as my son's wife—never! never!"

"Tush!—if she brings a few millions with her . . ."

"Those millions will come to you and to your sisters without her aid;—they belong to you, they ought never to have been taken out of the family. Then, antipathies are not things to be reasoned with, and I hate this creature, who usurps the first place everywhere. I trust to live long enough to see her a lost wretch, like her mother;—to see her trampled down in the mud, whence she came!"

"Softly, mother, softly! What has the poor child done to you? After all, if aunt Olga had not had this caprice, she would have had some other! And it is a pretty caprice, and gentle, and loving. All of which does not mean that I have any intention of marrying this nice girl. For the time being, I have but one care; but that is a horribly unpleasant care: I must have some money."

"What do you do with all the money that is given you?"

"I spend it; and I want to spend twice, three times as much. It is ridiculous to keep me so short; a fellow in my position ought to have a separate establishment and not always live with 'papa and mamma.' Oh, I have no ruinous plan in view; — I do not claim a palace; the least little house, the tiniest of cottages, would be all I should need. I know of one that would be just the thing!"

"Why, my boy, I should never see you at all if you did not live with us!" and Amélie's big cheeks were quite wet with maternal tears. But Maxime only shrugged his shoulders; he was not touched in the least by this outburst of feeling. To tell the truth, he was very cross indeed, switching off the leaves with his cane as he walked. Amélie, wiping her eyes, pursued the subject in a different tone.

"If you need money, why not get Olga to give you some? She has taken our fortune from us; the least she can do is to let us pick up the crumbs of the feast. As to your father, it is useless to ask him for more. I cannot even get him to pay my dress-maker."

While Amélie was giving this piece of maternal advice to her son, Olga was listening rather wearily to Jean, who had asked for a little confidential talk while the others crowded about the samovar.

"Yes, my dear Olga, this is an anxious period for parents. Girls must be provided for, husbands must be found. It is a very anxious moment."

"And expensive, too," answered Olga, trying to fix the uneasy glance of the banker.

She guessed what was coming, and she was philosophically resigned to the inevitable. She knew that there was talk of a possible marriage between Laure and a certain Monsieur des Granges; the youth was insignificant enough, but he was "viscount," and rich. So far, Laure had only seen his photograph, so that her maiden affections were as yet intact; but several business interviews had taken place between Jean and the lover's relatives; these relatives found the girl's fortune meagre, and there the matter rested.

Olga allowed her brother-in-law to bewail his fate, and to slide into insinuations, and thence into allusions to the past, with a few hints as to the family rights. She smiled, finding the game rather amusing; Jean's diplomacy always delighted her. Then, when she had had enough of her favorite pastime, she quietly announced her intention of doubling Laure's *dot*, so that the girl might hold a million of francs in her dainty palm.

Jean listened in silence; then he said softly:

"You are very generous. I have no doubt that, thanks to you, this marriage may take place. Your sense of justice will doubtless induce you to do for Claire and Maxime what you are willing to do for Laure?"

"Perhaps;—but I promise nothing. As to Maxime, I have my particular views regarding him."

The young man, passing, caught these words.

"And what are they, may I ask, most beautiful of aunts?" His father, having obtained what he wanted, left the field open to his promising heir. Maxime was very gallant with his aunt. In her double character of pretty woman and useful relative, she was a person to be cultivated. The winning ways of this handsome fellow, whose nature she perfectly understood, pleased Olga.

"I keep my views to myself for the moment, as the idea of speaking seriously with a frivolous fellow like you is not to be entertained. Sit down and tell me some funny story of your naughty world; make me laugh—I need to rest after the severe passage at arms I have just had with your father. He is not amusing, your father! oh, not at all amusing."

She was the confidante of all his follies, and she usually, by way of moral suasion, gave him a cheque that he might continue to amuse himself. Maxime did not exactly understand this novel fashion of choosing a husband for her adopted daughter; but as it was his theory that the less one troubled oneself to understand people or events the better it was, he let his handsome aunt into all his secrets.

Ivan Nariskine was secretly irritated by this conduct of Olga's; it was the first time he had ever found his ideal of perfection at fault. He was incapable of treating any subject lightly. Maxime did not seem to him what he seemed to the others — a pleasant fellow, gay and easy-tempered, a little wanting, perhaps, in solid principles. The worker despised this useless butterfly, and deemed him unworthy the name of man.

While he played with Zeé, Ivan lost no gesture of Olga's. Maxime had thrown himself on a cushion at his aunt's feet. Half-smothered laughs reached Ivan, and he let Zeé slip from his knee. The child, to whom Marca was offering some *bonbons*, ran away, and Ivan approached Olga just as she had slipped a crisp paper, that looked like a bank note, into Maxime's hand; he took it, as Zeé took the *bonbons*. Then he, like his father, having obtained what he wanted, sauntered away. Ivan sat down, looking very sombre. Olga's laugh had subsided; she had grown silent and looked a little worn.

"It is a queer comedy, I assure you, Ivan," she said at last, guessing his thoughts. "It is rather disgusting, I own — but funny, too, in its way."

"Have you sworn to make all these parasites viler even than nature intended them to be? Maxime takes your money, and spends it — I need not say how. You encourage his dissipation; — and yet you destine him to be almost your son."

"Bah! if Marca can love him, it shows that she is not capable of loving a nobler man. Besides, you are hard on Maxime; he is not a bad-hearted fellow."

"It is you who are unjust to Marca. She is absolutely ignorant of life; to her Maxime seems a sort of a Prince Charming out of a fairy story. She does not see him as he is, and it is quite natural that she should not. You should warn her."

"Take that upon yourself, my friend."

"I? — This is mere mockery. I am nobody here — less than nobody; my very presence in your family circle is odious or ridiculous, I scarcely know which!"

"Ivan!"

"It is the bitter truth. Let me leave you, Olga; my very talent is losing its manliness; I feel tempted often, in this hot-house atmosphere, to let myself go, to do as the others do,— to care for my pleasures and my comforts, and for nothing else. I was born for something better, it seems to me. Just now, when I felt the soft cheek of that little child against my cheek, I saw, as in a sudden vision, another sort of life, different from ours; an ideal of tender love, unlike mere fevered passion,— love which dares show itself to all; a healthy, honest love, which would not fear the blessed monotony of everyday life, with its work, and rest, and low talks by the common hearth, and the patter of little feet for its home music. Listen, Olga; I am no longer the obscure painter you sought out years ago; I am beginning to be known, to earn money — a great deal of money. Give up your fortune to those people who are trying to tear it away from you scrap by scrap, and be my wife. Think of this seriously, Olga, I beseech you. Our secret cannot long remain a secret; too many eyes are upon us; and the position of avowed lover to a very rich woman is a position I could not long endure. I know myself; at the first jar I should break away violently, and we should never see each other again."

"I thought we had discussed that question already, and resolved it. Give up my millions for the honor of darning your socks? Many thanks. I should no longer be myself; and at my age one does not easily learn a new part."

She said all this lightly enough; but she felt his eyes fixed on her; he was studying her as he had never studied her before. The weariness she had felt was stamped upon her face; for the time, she looked her age. Then suddenly he understood that the vision of happiness which had floated before his mind was a dream — nothing more. Olga could never be that wife, that mother of young children, whose image had tempted him. Then quickly his eyes sought the child he had played with. The pretty little creature, weary with play, had nestled in Marca's arms. The two formed an exquisite group; he had never before noticed the sweet womanliness which was visible through the careless gaiety of this young girl ; she suddenly seemed to him singularly pretty and lovable. All this scarcely lasted an instant ; but Olga had understood his thoughts as though he had put them into words. A glance at a mirror told her that she looked old. It was a moment of atrocious suffering ; she was not, however, a woman easily overcome. Her voice was no longer mocking, but tender and caressing, as she said:

"You are quite right, Ivan ; our idle life is not fit for such as you; you need work, and hard work too. Shut yourself up in your studio ; you now begin to 'see' your picture, as you express it; you have a great quantity of studies and sketches. Lock your door, and only open it a week hence, when I shall pay you a visit."

Ivan started to his feet. All the thoughts which Olga had read seemed to him now monstrous and impossible; he forgot them, — and, indeed, they had but flitted across his mind. He was looking into Olga's eyes; she was beautiful once more, and young; she loved him, and he read that love in the depths of those strange eyes.

"You will come! — really — really ?"

"Yes — my Ivan."

CHAPTER VIII.

"BUY something of me, too, my pretty young lady!"

This cry followed Marca, as she passed through the flower-market of the Madeleine. The young girl flitted here and there, happy and busy; she was accompanied by her maid, and followed by a big footman, who almost disappeared behind the mass of flowers he carried. Marca was still buying, right and left, big bunches of roses, of lilies of the valley, of lilacs,—flowers cut and flowers in pots,—so that the maid, also, was forced to carry an armful. Marca had at last obtained permission to go and see her old schoolmistress, who, as she well remembered, was passionately fond of flowers.

It was the very end of April; a season when Paris is so really beautiful, full of joy and sunshine. All the tall white houses seemed very white, and threw gay sparkles from the numberless window-panes; the young leaves glistened with the rain-drops, for between the fits of sunshine fell fresh showers, lasting a few minutes only. The white and moving clouds, as they separated, showed great patches of deep blue, and there were whiffs of fresh wind which caused the trees to bend, and the women to hold down their rebellious skirts. In this pretty flower-market, spread at the feet of the big church, spring reigned supreme ; sweet odors of violets, of lilacs, of roses, filled the air. The market-women, who had shivered all winter, their feet on a *chaufferette*, their red hands wrapped in their aprons, now hovered around their flower-tents, selling as fast as they could, laughing familiarly with their customers.

There was quite a crowd, going and coming ; even those who did not mean to buy went out of their way to pass down between the flower-stands and smell the sweet odors ; and few of these resisted the temptation of buying at least a bunch of violets for the worker at home. Ladies in pretty spring costumes cheapened the pots of flowers, as well as the poorest workwoman; children, excited by the sunshine, pulled the mammas by the hand. All these people were laughing and talking, sauntering here and there, happy to think that the days of cold and frost were all over.

But it was Marca who seemed most of all at home among these flowers. Her youth smiled at the spring-time; her fresh cheeks, her child eyes, caused many a passer-by to turn as he went, thinking that she, like the year, was nearing her May-time. There is something in a young girl, when she is frankly and triumphantly young, which causes one to stop and look, thinking, with sudden tenderness, of this life, just beginning; one is almost grateful to her for her bright unconsciousness, for the fearlessness with which she goes her way, sure beforehand that life will give her good gifts of love and happiness. One thinks it a crime to destroy such illusions; and gently one passes by, smiling with a half-sad smile.

"At least," said the woman, "she does not cheapen our flowers; she is so pretty she must bring good luck with her. She bought roses of me; my day will be a good one!"

However, Marca could not buy up the whole market; besides, there suddenly came a shower, while the sun still shone brightly, causing the raindrops to glisten, many-colored, as they fell. The women, with little screams, tucked up their skirts and opened their umbrellas; and Marca, laughing, ran toward the waiting carriage, showing as she went her dainty feet and bit of red stocking. The footman, unalterably grave, placed the flowered mass as best he could in front of "Mademoiselle"; then the carriage rolled swiftly toward the exterior boulevards, splashing the pedestrians as it went.

The coachman drew up his horses before a tall house, that seemed to have grown up there through some mistake. Close by was a tumbledown building, quite deserted, humbly awaiting the day of destruction. The proprietor of the land on which stood the hovel, being of a speculative turn of mind, waited patiently the inevitable rise of value; for this part of Paris, under the shade of Montmartre, was sure sooner or later to become very popular. Buildings were going on all around; the sidewalks were encumbered with mortar and piles of stones. It was a disorderly corner of the town, with a look of sordid poverty seeking to assume an appearance of prosperity, which is perhaps the most unpleasant of its many unpleasant aspects. In the midst of it all, the fine carriage stopped before the tall, bleak-looking house, and all the urchins of the neighborhood came to look at the rare spectacle; the stout coachman, protected by the umbrella of the solemn footman, seemed particularly to excite their delight.

Marca shivered slightly as she began to ascend the staircase. It was narrow, clean, highly waxed, filled with an odor peculiar to certain French staircases—an odor made up of many elements which arose from the wax, made their way from the different kitchens, mingled with the damp of the place, where no sun ever penetrated; the narrow windows which lighted each flight were never opened, and no whiff of outdoor air came to disperse the sickening smell. As Marca climbed the steep steps, she glanced through these windows, and saw that the immense irregular court which spread behind the tall house was lined with many buildings, nearly all of poor appearance. Quite far off, she saw the large windows of artists' studios; and in a corner, against the bare lot next door, she saw with some surprise a tiny house, or little *hôtel* as they would call it in Paris, elegant enough, and shaded by trees, for a small garden was attached to it. While all the vulgar buildings around swarmed with inhabitants, this tiny dwelling was evidently empty — much out of repair, even.

The lodge-keeper had told Marca to go up five flights, so that she had plenty of time to observe all these details. The noise of the court scarcely reached her as she ascended; no nearer sound disturbed the cold respectability of the staircase. At each flight there were three doors, each with its narrow mat; the meagre bell-ropes seemed to tell of the decent poverty hidden behind each door. One guessed all the silent struggles of poor old maids, of retired officers, to "make the two ends meet," even while keeping up "a certain appearance." All the humble sadnesses and sacrifices seemed to mingle with the stuffy cold of the stairway.

Marca felt this influence; she had sprung from the carriage joyously, but at each step this joyousness fell. The flowers she held, and with which her maid was loaded, seemed to wilt in the uncongenial air. She was asking herself how it happened that her dear Madame Langlois should live on the fifth floor of such a house. She had always seen her teacher surrounded by every comfort; she well remembered the large, well-aired, well-warmed country-house, with its pretty drawing-rooms, where the pupils went when they chose, for they were treated like daughters; the comfortable furniture, the knick-knacks here and there, the books on the tables, the pictures on the walls, had made of this school something quite apart — a large home. In her note, Madame Langlois had spoken of reverses; but youth scarcely understands the words of ruin or sorrow, and Marca was quite unprepared for so terrible a change. She scarcely knew what attitude to assume, and hesitated some moments before ringing at the door. Julie, the maid, assumed a look of scorn, and tossed her head.

Madame Langlois herself came to the door, and with a radiant smile she opened her arms to her old pupil; she was as completely at her ease as though all her life she had been her own servant.

"It is Spring itself that has come to me!"

The voice at least was not changed, nor the gentle, dignified manners. Marca forgot her hesitation, and kissed her dear friend over and over again.

"You may leave me, Julie," she said gaily, "and do not come back for me before five o'clock. Put all the flowers and the basket in the drawing-room — this way; is it not? I may stay to lunch, may I not, dear Madame? I pillaged a pastrycook's shop as well as the flower market; — and I may set the table myself, may I not?"

Marca continued her light talk, but she took in at a glance the poverty of the place. The flowers heaped on the table covered it entirely;

she saw about her the wreck of the old school furniture; the *salon* was visibly dining-room as well; a sideboard held a few dishes and glasses; a door opened on a tiny bed-room, and at the other end of the dark antechamber she caught a glimpse of a small kitchen; — that was all. Even in the drawing-room there were no pretty trifles, no shadow of luxury; the bare necessary articles — nothing beyond a single arm-chair near the window. Madame Langlois was now seated in it, and Marca noted with pain how changed she was, how pale, how worn. She knelt by her old friend, and laying her head caressingly against her, said:

"Tell me, what is the meaning of all this? I have a right to know — since I love you!"

"My poor child, why should I sadden you with my sorrows? I like to see you gay; your smile does me so much good!"

"But I am no longer a child. I am quite capable of understanding you. I also have my moments of sadness."

"Which leave no trace, at least," said Madame Langlois, smiling at the bright young face.

"Perhaps not — it is so good to be happy; but happiness does not make one selfish. I should so like to give you a little of my gladness!"

"Give me a little pity; that is all I ask. You are seventeen, and I am fifty-five; you are full of life, — I am dying, slowly but inevitably; I study the progress of the dreadful disease which is killing me with a sort of curiosity; I only wish it were more rapid. I am like some wounded forest creature; I hide myself to die. You are astonished to find me in this poor place; in order to save . . . some one, I had to give a large sum, all I had put by—two hundred thousand francs. The sale of my furniture and trinkets produced enough to buy me a small annuity; I can even pay a doctor. I have a woman who comes every morning to clean the place, and every evening to cook my dinner; the remnants I eat cold for my lunch, which I prepare myself. So you see, Marca, that you may satisfy your fancy and lay the cloth presently? You wished to know; are you satisfied?"

Marca remained quite silent for a few moments. It was so terrible that she found no word of consolation, merely kissing her friend repeatedly. Without exactly knowing why, and in spite of her real sympathy, this story sounded like a discordant note in a superb harmony; all about her was so radiant with happiness and prosperity that she longed to see happiness everywhere, so as to enjoy her own with a calm conscience. At last she said:

"But you have friends, relatives;—surely they will not leave you thus alone!"

"I had a son. I have lost him. My friends were acquaintances—nothing more. There are some friendships that need to be dressed in silks and satins. My pupils, as you know, were mostly foreigners, and have gone here and there.

Some of them still write to me, but that will not last ; other interests will absorb them. I still have you, my little Marca, because your childhood was a desolate one, and you grew to love me, having no one else to love. But I know your godmother better than you do; had she allowed it, you would have come to see me long ago, I am sure. You have been permitted to visit me to-day, because one must yield a little to children's whims; but the permission will not be granted a second time. Mademoiselle de Schneefeld must forget the past, so as to give herself up entirely to the brilliant present."

"Mademoiselle de Schneefeld will never forget those she loves!" cried Marca, with youthful enthusiasm.

"You will not forget me, dear child, I am sure of that; the baronne has no power over your heart—but she has over your actions. If sorrow were to overtake you, then you would come back to me—it would be quite natural ; and I am thus reduced to hope never again to see you. . . . But we are foolish to mar my one bright day of happiness with dismal thoughts. I want to see you smile ; to treasure up a little sunshine for the cloudy future. Come, Miss, to work ; let us deck the room with all these beautiful flowers, and then think of our luncheon."

At seventeen, tears are quickly dried ; and a few minutes later Marca was chattering merrily as she arranged her flowers. She had a real talent for such work. Soon there were no more vases, so she took everything she could find that would hold water; a deep dish, in which she strewed a quantity of violets, throwing among them a few roses, the whole resting on a bed of light ferns, had immense success. Then came the preparations for lunch; the table looked very pretty, with its centre bouquet, its dainty linen and glass, remnants of past luxury, and the immense *pâté* Marca had brought. The young girl was not yet beyond the age when cakes and sweets delight one, and the small sideboard was loaded with varied desserts. As she found some fresh eggs in the kitchen, Marca amused herself with boiling them over the spirit-lamp, watch in hand.

"How happy you make me, dear child!—how happy you make me!" repeated Madame Langlois, as she followed each rapid, graceful movement of her pupil. She found her grown and prettier, with a graceful and supple figure, which the dainty spring suit showed to advantage. The merest trifle the girl wore spoke of wealth — even though, according to French notions of what is suited to young ladies, her toilette was strictly simple. Madame Langlois, as she looked at her, remembered all her fears for this child's future—her useless efforts to make a learned scholar of the careless, happy-natured girl; and now she was reassured. Marca seemed to be indeed the daughter of the house, and she had no need of working to obtain a diploma. She caused the girl to tell her all about her daily life of busy idleness: the visits, the balls, the theatres, all of which this young worldling delighted in. She learned that Baronne Amélie could not bear her — why, Marca could not guess; perhaps because Claire was so fond of her — and Maxime too; yes, certainly Maxime was very kind indeed . . . but of him she only spoke when Madame Langlois asked direct questions about him, and each time she pronounced his name the tell-tale blood rushed up to the young face. In the midst of such talk the hours slipped rapidly by.

They were still chatting cosily when they heard a ring at the bell.

"Do not be alarmed; it is no ceremony visit which we are about to receive. It is three o'clock — Pierre Dubois is coming to bring back a book and to ask for another. He is my last pupil, dear, — a mere workman, who interests me greatly. I must open the door."

"You! what an idea!" and Marca ran to perform the service.

The sitting-room was in a direct line with the front door; the little place was full of sunshine, which came through the open window, and the soft spring air was loaded with the scent of the many flowers. Marca stood in the flood of light; her face, turned toward the entry, was in shadow, but the sunbeams made a sort of golden halo about her curly head, and gave relief to the outline of her pretty, graceful person.

The workman stopped an instant, abashed at so unexpected an apparition.

"Come in, Monsieur Pierre. You see, I know your name. Madame Langlois is quite prepared to give you the book."

The young man stammered a few words; he was terribly confused, and kept turning his cap between his fingers. He was about four-and-twenty, very decently dressed, with a look of intelligence and decision about his strong-featured face. His eyes, full of wonder and admiration, were fixed on Marca; this amused the girl, and did not in the least embarrass her — he was but a workman.

"I must present my two pupils to each other. Mademoiselle Marca de Schneefeld, who this morning brought me a little joy mixed up with a cart-load of flowers, a big pasty, and numberless cakes, which she nibbles with evident pleasure: Monsieur Pierre Dubois, printer to one of the great Paris newspapers, where I trust that one of these days he may employ others to print his articles."

"When that happens, I will read the newspaper for the first time," said Marca, pleasantly.

Pierre wanted to respond with something very fine for this little speech, but could find nothing save the merest commonplace words of thanks. Marca's smile of amusement at his awkwardness made him lose all his presence of mind. Madame Langlois came to the rescue with her quiet grace.

"Come, Pierre, have you brought me the last part of your composition? Here is the beginning, corrected; you will find some remarks on the margin. Your great defect is a good one: you want to do too well; you lack simplicity. To write easily, one should never put on white kid gloves."

While Madame Langlois was talking with her "last pupil," questioning him on what he had read, and saying a few clear words about the book she had put aside for him, Marca amused herself in looking over the volume he had brought back—Bossuet.

"Why, that is the book I kept so long in my desk, do you remember, dear Madame? I was not as good a pupil as Monsieur Pierre; I did not care for the funeral orations—too much mourning for me! See, here is still the little red ribbon which marked my place, and which was so rarely disturbed!"

Pierre no longer listened to Madame Langlois; he was looking at the young girl.

Before long he took his leave. He had reached the door, when he turned, with that abruptness which so often characterizes timidity, and said rapidly:

"Madame, would you mind letting me keep the Bossuet a little longer? It seems to me I could still study certain pages with profit." He blushed painfully as he spoke.

"Certainly—certainly."

Marca, rather astonished at this ardor for study, handed him the book, then thought no more of it. Madame Langlois, who knew human nature rather better, thought to herself that she was likely never again to see the "Oraisons funèbres." "Poor fellow!" thought she.

"You have a queer pupil, but he does you honor, at any rate," said Marca, looking after the workman. "How did you come to know of this rough diamond in need of polish?"

"It came about simply enough. He has a room just above. One day I was taken with a violent attack, and tried to call for help. I had just strength enough to drag myself to the door and open it; Pierre heard me, and found me fainting; he cared for me as a son might have done, and never since has he passed my door without asking whether he could be of use to me. We got to be great friends. I lent him books and made him talk about them. I found that he was as intelligent as noble-hearted. He had taught himself many things, but he had yet much to learn. I became his teacher, and the interest I feel in my pupil is my last joy. He is but a workman, Marca; but I doubt whether the fine gentlemen who dance with you are as true gentlemen as he is. You are quite right in saying that he does me honor."

The hour of departure came all too soon. Marca felt herself better, less frivolous, for the time spent near her old friend, who bore sorrow with such simple dignity. She could not help asking herself how the Baronne Olga, were the positions reversed, would endure solitude, poverty, and a cruel illness.

"I shall come back — you will see, dear Madame!"

Madame Langlois smiled sadly. When the door closed behind the young girl, she let herself fall in her arm-chair, and looked at the flowers, which already drooped; she could not help saying to herself that it was hard indeed to remain all alone, waiting for death.

CHAPTER IX.

THE opening of the Spring exhibition of pictures of the *salon*, as it is called, is a great event for the novelty-loving Paris world. Painters are the lions of the day; the other arts are esteemed, certainly, but painting is the fashionable art above all others. It was no wonder, therefore, that on the "varnishing day" carriages rolled unceasingly along the Champs Elysées, and deposited fine ladies, in pretty spring dresses, at the door of the Palais d'Industrie. The lazy worldlings were all up betimes on that day. Hurrying by were more modest visitors: young men who wore an anxious look; artists who had already forgotten the thrill of joy which the official announcement of the acceptance of their work had caused them, and now wondered with beating heart where the picture was placed — on the line or high up out of sight — a vital question. The motley crowd was swallowed by the huge building; the broad, dusty staircase was gay with its throng of men and women; nods and smiles and merry greetings were exchanged. These people were happy at finding themselves among the privileged beings who could see the *salon* before the public; the fact that the privilege was extended to many thousands did not trouble them.

Olga was among these, with all her family. She was dressed in black — a marvellously becoming toilette, with jet cuirasse, that glittered, and that moulded her perfect figure; a bird-of-paradise relieved the black of her hat. She felt that she was particularly handsome; and so indeed she was. She had always meant to be; for this was a day long waited for, often dreamed of — a day of triumph for her painter. She had questioned the members of the jury — saying nothing to Ivan on the subject, however — and these gentlemen, usually too much engrossed with admiration of their own works to think much of others, had owned that Mr. Nariskine's picture had produced great effect on the committee, and had been very well placed. Ivan had not accompanied her, but they were all to meet before his picture.

Marca, who had never seen anything of the sort, felt a little dazzled when she found herself in the great square room, the first which one enters. The light fell crudely on all these pictures, which time had not toned down, and whose colors seemed too fresh and too violent. An immense piece of decorative work, with doubtful architecture, and many ladies with or without draperies, in various attitudes, occupied the centre place of honor; huge pictures, historical, allegorical — attempts at high art — were distributed on the walls; and French talent being ill at ease in high art, these conscientious efforts were, as a general thing, very emphatic, like false declamation: full of noble attitudes and well balanced groups, and absolutely void of anything approaching genius. Marca, like most novices in matters of art, felt bound to look at all these and try to admire them; but she soon turned to less pretentious works, where the French school is really masterly: fresh, simple landscapes, with the shimmery silver-grey light of a moist climate; some good portraits; many carefully painted figure-pictures. Even at this early hour one guessed which among all these were destined to be successful. A military picture in particular was much surrounded. It represented, like all military pictures since 1870, an episode of the invasion; it must have been quite at the beginning of the war, for it was in autumn. A country house, taken by the Prussians, was being attacked anew by the French; the pretty garden, still full of flowers, looked as though it had just been abandoned; it was filled with soldiers firing from behind the trees, crouching here and there, while more comrades rushed in through the breach in the stone wall; the house was already marked with many bullet-holes; from its barricaded windows constant firing was being kept up. The wounded and dead soldiers were well drawn and well grouped. The color was a little cold, and each accessory was painted with as much care as the principal figures; but the talent of the painter was undeniable, and his success assured. In a corner of the picture the sentimental episode was not forgotten; on a garden bench a book lay still opened, while a child's toy was seen on the gravel hard by. A young soldier had dragged himself to the spot to die.

Marca, keeping Claire with her, flitted here and there. Everything amused and interested her; she had never before seen anything of the kind, and she felt a vast respect for the authors of all these varied works. She preferred, however, those pictures which told a story. Beside the military scene, there was a pretty picture representing a country wedding; it seemed to her that the bridegroom, who headed the procession with his young wife, looked a little like Maxime; but she dared not draw Claire's attention to the fact; she only spoke of the pretty effect of the many-colored dresses between the trees. She would willingly have stayed a long time in this first *salon*, but Olga, who had something more interesting in view, called to her impatiently, and led the way through an interminable series of rooms, each marked with a letter in alphabetical order.

The party was too large to remain always together, and Marca soon discovered that Maxime had taken his sister's place.

"You find this amusing, little cousin?"

"Yes, indeed. But I think the crowd more amusing even than the pictures. One hears such funny bits of talk; people are so eager and so pleased or so furious; no one seems to think it necessary to hide his or her feelings. Then the critics, who pass along looking knowing, scribbling notes in pocket-books, are so severe! Nothing pleases them. It is great fun!"

Olga was getting more and more impatient. It seemed to her that the letter "N" would never be reached. She led the way faster and faster. Marca and Maxime came last of all. Amélie kept watch over them as best she could; but as she could not, being a French mother, leave her daughters unprotected, she could but make signs to Maxime, which signs produced but little results. She considered her sister-in-law as forgetting her most sacred duties, thus to leave Marca three yards off, under the care of a young man. Marca, quite unconscious of all this indignation, went her way, serenely happy.

The two found themselves stopped by a crowd which had gathered around a picture. It was a portrait — that of a peasant woman seated in the shade of a tree, knitting. It had evidently been painted out-of-doors. The subject was not a refined one; it was really a peasant face, tanned and wrinkled, with an expression of satisfied repose. One felt that she had been an active, good and intelligent creature, that she had worked hard, and that her work had brought forth its fruits; perhaps a son, grown to manhood, now did her honor.

"Fine portrait, that—by whom?" asked some one.

"A new fellow, it seems," was the answer. "He is not a *Prix de Rome;* one feels it. Rough painting—no prettiness there—but one will hear of the painter, or I am mistaken."

Remarks were made right and left; some attacked, others defended this bold attempt at something new in art. But Marca did not listen any more; she found herself close to a young man who was not looking at the picture. His eyes were fixed on the upturned face of a very young woman, who was saying, quite low:

"You see, dear, it is a great success. I was sure it would be—you worked so hard."

"I was working for you, my little wife. We shall no longer be so very poor now. And the dear old mother—how glad she will be! To think that it is her portrait which is making me known!"

They seemed to forget the crowd; they fancied themselves alone, being so happy one in another. Doubtless he thought her very pretty in spite of her poor black dress and her home-made bonnet.

It must be happiness, thought Marca, to live thus one for the other; to find privations and hardships easy to bear, because one is not alone to bear them; and together to triumph over evil fortune. She became very silent; it seemed to her that work was a holy and good thing; that life must be worth living, when one struggles with difficulties and is victorious in the end. Then she looked at Maxime, handsome, careless Maxime, who knew nothing of work, whose one aim seemed to be to kill time agreeably—to be gay and well-dressed, amiable to young ladies; who found it quite natural to spend what others earned. For the first time she asked herself what such a man would prove to be at forty; and then she almost wondered that she should love him as she did. . . . Maxime, noticing her sudden silence, asked the cause of it; and she described the little scene just witnessed.

"Quite poetic and touching;—but why the deuce is virtue always so ill dressed?"

Marca, who was in the habit of laughing at all Maxime's small jokes and sayings, did not laugh at this one. She looked after the young couple now, almost lost in the crowd; and she said, with some emotion:

"If I were a man, I should like to work, to struggle, to do something with this life which certainly was not given us simply to be idled away."

"Tut, my pretty cousin,—what new mood is this? Not one surely for this sweet spring day. Keep your virtuous fits for November fogs, my dear Marca. I understand your insinuations full well; but I beg you to note that all men are not born painters; besides, I can hardly fancy mother sitting to me in a white linen cap, with coarse knitting in her hand."

"It is really too easy to turn everything into ridicule, Maxime. There are other kinds of work to be done, and I think no man should be exempt."

"You are like my father; you wish me to do a clerk's work. Why, I never could add up two lines without making a mistake! But I am not such a lazy dog as you seem to think; I work in my way — I also struggle and long for victory! At this present moment I am working very hard to make you smile — and — and I have succeeded. I have not lived in vain!"

His mock heroic style did make her smile; but she remained more absorbed and silent than he liked to see her.

They were at last in the room "N." In the centre of the principal panel Ivan Nariskine's picture occupied the place of honor. The painter welcomed Olga and her party. He was completely happy. Every artist knows that feeling of anxiety lest the picture which looked well in the studio should not stand the glare of the public exhibition-room and the contact of other works; this test is to the painter what the foot-lights are to a play. One can never be sure of success beforehand. Ivan's picture stood this trial admirably; there could no longer be any doubt. Olga had not been mistaken in her appreciation of her painter; his work was the greatest success of the exhibition. His fortune and his reputation were now secured; Paris was proclaiming him a great painter. His one desire was to put his triumph at her feet; he almost forgot his usual prudence; he would have liked to proclaim aloud that he loved this woman, and was loved by her.

The room was soon crowded. Olga held

court here as though she had been at home. Since her return she had made the acquaintance of many distinguished persons — men, for the most part — and many other distinguished people wished to be presented to her. Her house was spoken of as a marvel of taste — and she had such a good cook! It is true that she appropriated Mr. Nariskine rather too openly, but as yet this was merely whispered; she was so grandly unconscious of all evil talk! Then she always appeared in public with an escort of young girls; the innocence of all these white dresses protected her own reputation. At any rate, that day Olga was queen. She received all the compliments showered upon her with a gracious condescension, smiling her own peculiar smile. She presented her painter to all these people, with great pride; she found that success became him. He was so happy that he ceased to be awkward; and a furtive glance now and then told her that he had never been more enamored. She no longer feared noise and publicity; her love had entered another phase, and required the accessories of satisfied vanity and public incense. In after times Olga remembered this day as the crowning day of her life. Many small pleasures added to her one great joy. She was the centre of all things, the one important person in view. Her husband's family served as her escort — but that was all; one felt this in the cringing of her brother-in-law; he carried her parasol; he looked out the numbers in her catalogue; he was the veriest courtier of the — adventuress! Amélie, fortunately for her, was too busy with her own affairs to suffer as much as she would have done otherwise, from the humbled position which was assigned to her. She was watching with eager eyes each group that entered. Evidently she was expecting some one.

Marca was no longer gay; and Maxime, finding this unpardonable in a young lady whom he honored with his attentions, had left her. From her place she could catch a glimpse of him, as, in the next room, he flirted outrageously with a yellow-haired actress known to all Paris.

Marca, feeling a little desolate, kept thinking of the happy young couple so isolated by their love. As she glanced at Ivan's picture, which was constantly surrounded by admirers, she could not help thinking that it was a pity he should not be able to share his triumph with a young wife, who, after weary years of waiting, would now doubly appreciate the joy of success. She was seated on the long bench in the centre of the room, and Laure was by her side. The two girls were not very intimate; besides a certain difference of age and the natural importance of a young lady who would doubtless soon marry, there was on Laure's part something of her mother's antipathy for the intruder. However, youth seeks youth, and it sometimes happened that Laure talked confidentially to Marca.

"Why on earth are you looking at that picture with those widely opened eyes of yours? Are you in love with the painter?"

"No," said Marca, smiling quietly; the idea struck her as quite funny.

"Then look at me instead. Talk. Say anything you please — nonsense will do; but I cannot remain stuck here without saying anything, as though I were waiting — expecting some one."

"How — waiting?" and Marca, suddenly shaken from her reverie, saw that her cousin was unusually moved; that her color came and went, that her hands nervously clutched each other.

"It is true — I am waiting. You see, this *salon* is not only an exhibition of works of art; other goods are on show — marriageable girls, for instance. I always know when I am to be examined with a view to matrimony, though I am not often warned in so many words. Sometimes it is at a party, sometimes at a shopping expedition, or at the opera; it little matters where. But when I am told to put on new gloves, or have my hair done over again, I always know what it means. This has lasted three years. I begin to feel that it is time it ended. At first I did not mind; I knew it had to be; others had submitted, I was quite willing to submit also. I knew that marriage was a necessity, and that one had to make the best of it; that it was a question of money, of social position, of age. Only, in my case there are difficulties; we live very expensively—and people expect a larger *dot* than my father can, or will, give me. More than once a candidate has made pretty little speeches to me between two waltzes, as to the sympathy he felt for me; but this delicate feeling, being of a weakly constitution, did not resist the necessary revelations as to my fortune. My father has had a great deal of trouble in the affair; sometimes he is quite cross with me in consequence."

"How can you say so, Laure? Your father is very proud of you. He thinks you handsome; and so you are, dear!"

Laure smiled disdainfully. Marca, who had always seen this young lady perfectly calm and mistress of her feelings, felt suddenly drawn to her cousin, and took her hand affectionately. But Laure did not notice the caress; she wanted a vent to her own feelings, and found it in her rapid, feverish talk; she did not at all crave Marca's affection.

"You thought I found the game an amusing one, did you not? I find it loathsome! Really, a girl ought to toss to know which admirer she should marry; it would be more simple, and not lead to greater mistakes than our usual system. Do you think that after a five minutes' interview I can tell whether a man is likely to make me happy during a lifetime? Does he carry the imprint of his virtues and vices, his character and his tastes, on his face—in the cut of his beard or the shape of his hands? When I say to mamma that I should like to know my future husband, to see him often, very often, before saying the final yes, she answers that all that is sentimental nonsense; that a young man cannot be admitted into our intimacy until he is introduced as a future husband; and once engaged no girl in our set can draw back. You see that my idea of tossing a penny is a good idea. Presently we shall see mamma — she is very red to-day, is she not? — go to meet a party of friends; there will be much smiling, bowing, and scraping; the ladies will embrace, and say 'dear' to each other; and in the midst of the group will be a young man whom I have never yet seen, and whom I shall, according to every probability, swear to love, honor and obey, just two months hence. My father is tired of parading me about, and orders me to make up my mind — that is, to accept. Aunt Olga doubles my *dot*, and Monsieur des Granges, taking that under consideration, has consented to see whether the cut of my face suits him."

"But, Laure, you must rebel! It is not possible that you should allow yourself to be thus bartered away! After all, it is not for one's father that one should marry, but for oneself. You will be unhappy, my poor Laure!"

"Words — nothing but words! Sentiment has nothing to do with the whole affair. A girl marries, as her brother becomes lawyer or doctor; it is her profession. Certainly I should prefer to choose my husband freely — as Aunt

Olga says you may; and talk to my heart's content with nice young men — as you talk with Maxime," and Laure shot a side glance at the young girl. "But those are foreign notions, which my parents consider very shocking indeed. No, no, I am reasonable; and if young des Granges is not absolutely idiotic or displeasing, I shall say 'yes' easily enough."

"My poor Laure!"

"Bah! I am a little cross to-day, but that will pass. I shall resign myself to my fate, as others have done before me. There are compensations; and often, after beginning some bitter tirade against the heartlessness of the world, I get to thinking about my wedding-dress, and forget to finish the tirade. Then I shall be called 'Madame la Vicomtesse,'" and she laughed a little nervous laugh, not pleasant to hear.

Just then the little comedy described beforehand by the young girl was actually taking place. Laure, withou tturning her head, saw the smiles and gestures, and remembering the part she was called upon to play, went on talking to Marca, who seemed by far the more agitated of the two. The young vicomte, a pale youth, very fair and insignificant looking, stood by his mother; he glanced toward the two girls, and murmured:

"Charming! charming! I adore blue."

Amélie looked at him with fury in her maternal eye. Her daughter was dressed in grey; it was Marca who wore a blue suit. The mother of the ill-advised youth whispered something in his ear, and he continued, without a change of expression:

"Pretty idea — blue bow on grey dress — charming! Your daughter is a perfect beauty, Madame."

Laure, who knew just what she had to do, rose quietly, taking her cousin's arm, and went toward Mr. Nariskine's picture, as though she wished to examine it with greater attention. It was before the picture that the formal presentation took place. Laure behaved admirably; she was self-possessed, gentle, and modest. Marca looked at her with amazement, wondering whether she could really be the same girl who some minutes before had spoken such bitter and passionate words. Marca felt humiliated for her, and very sad. She quietly withdrew from the group, where she was in no way needed.

"You are sad, Mademoiselle; I scarcely ever saw you, till now, without a smile on your lips — a smile first cousin to a laugh."

Nariskine, who had been watching her, had guessed that she felt a little strange and lost among all these people, engrossed with family affairs.

Marca did not answer at once; she was following her own train of thoughts; and presently she said, quite abruptly:

"Did that girl tell you her story?" and she pointed to the picture.

"I think I guessed most of it. When one

has suffered one understands the sufferings and humiliations of others."

"That is why you guessed just now that I felt lonely and forgotten. Thank you; I shall never tease you again, and I shall try and be a better sitter. Do you know what I was thinking about while examining your beautiful picture? I was wondering whether I might not have been like this girl if Marraine had not made a fine young lady of me; perhaps she suffered much dreadful hunger, and privations of all sorts, before consenting to earn her bread thus. It seemed to me that I understood all the poor child's struggles and sufferings. You were more than an artist when you painted that picture, Mr. Nariskine,—you were also a poet; and that is why I so like your work."

"I have received many compliments to-day, Mademoiselle, but none has touched me like this."

"Mine is not a compliment; it is my feeling, which I put into words,—that is all. I am glad if it makes up for my naughtiness;" and with smiling frankness she gave him her hand.

They were standing a little apart from the others, and Jean, who just then was seated near his sister-in-law, watched them curiously.

"Well, Jean, you are satisfied at last, I hope; it seems to me that your paternal anxieties are likely to be quieted."

"Thanks to you, my dear Olga. Yes, I shall now be able to rest in peace for some years.

Claire seems even younger than she is; we will have to think of Marca's wedding before hers. How pretty she is to-day!—just look at her!" He chose the very moment when Marca, in her innocent frankness, put her hand in the painter's. "Dear — dear! but one would say the child was attending to her own affairs. Has she taste for the fine arts?"

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Olga, sharply, forgetting herself just one instant. Jean noted the start and the tone of voice. "Marca — think of Mr. Nariskine as a husband? Why, she spends her life in teasing him." Olga, quite calm, smiled disdainfully. "Moreover, he looks upon her as quite a child; he might almost be her father."

"Rather a young father, my dear Olga." Jean had his idea, and did not let it go. "He is but a little over thirty, and Marca is seventeen."

Olga's lip quivered an instant; there is a revolting brutality in numbers; she had perhaps never before quite understood how much younger her lover was than herself. Jean continued: "Artists are all the rage just now, and many rich girls, well-born too, consent to marry them. I assure you the idea deserves serious consideration; especially as artists are free from many of the prejudices of our set,— and after all, you know Marca's birth."

"Marca is my adopted daughter; that suffices. You know very well that she is to marry, not Mr.

Nariskine, but your son, Maxime." She said these words with cold decision.

"Who can tell?" said Jean, using his softest voice. "Amélie, who is by no means free from narrow prejudices, objects to the irregularity of the birth."

"Does your wife wish me to lose all patience? She has still a daughter on her hands; and Claire, who is not pretty, may need to find a million among her wedding fineries. Say to her that I do not ask for her consent — but that I buy it! Maxime has debts, and no very good reputation; he may consider himself very lucky to marry a pretty girl, rich, and who is, besides, willing to adore him — why, I cannot tell. I advise you to lecture your wife and bring her to her senses. I have said my say."

She rose. She had spoken with cynical harshness; every word had struck her brother-in-law like a whip-lash. But Jean kept smiling in spite of it all. There was more than mere anger against her sister-in-law in this sudden change of Olga's; and Jean, who was curious of people's secrets, thought that he was on the right scent this time. Until now Olga had always said that she did not mean her adopted daughter to marry too soon — in a few years she would think of it; and though she had always let it be understood that at the end of those years Maxime might perhaps be the chosen husband, she had never before said so. There was decidedly a change in Olga's mood.

CHAPTER X.

THE end of the season that year was very brilliant. The young girls went to many fine balls, and at Baronne Olga's house there was dancing every week. Marca enjoyed all this immensely; she had all the fresh energy of extreme youth, and, besides, hers was a particularly healthy and hearty nature, asking of life nothing but what life can give. Many troubling questions, the great "why" of hidden things, left her peacefully indifferent, so far. She danced and chatted and laughed with gay carelessness, as though a perpetual holiday stretched before her; there might be something beyond that holiday — that she knew full well — but it was in the dim distance, and she was too happy to pry into so remote a future. She was a great favorite in society; her partners found it pleasant to talk to a fresh, intelligent girl who knew how to say more than "yes" or "no," and who had not eternally a *chaperon* watching every gesture and look.

Her godmother was well satisfied with Marca; she liked to hear her laugh, and the sight of her sparkling eyes and bright complexion was pleasant to her. Her girlish triumphs amused Olga. Had she been plain, awkward, born to be a wallflower, Olga's caprice would have been over long ago; but as it was, Marca's youth and high spirits were necessary to the comfort of the household, and the baronne delighted in saying, loud enough to be heard by all her relatives, that the young girl was her adopted daughter and heiress to all she possessed.

Naturally such a declaration produced its inevitable fruits. Several proposals, more or less tempting, were made for Mademoiselle de Schneefeld's hand. Olga conscientiously consulted Marca as to the answer these proposals should receive.

"Let me enjoy myself, Marraine; there is plenty of time to think of such things."

"Do you not wish to marry?"

Marca would then blush, and smile, and finally run away, quite convinced that her godmother's good-natured smile could mean but one thing, and that she could not think of offering her a husband other than Maxime.

Since the varnishing day, Jean had made no further allusions to Marca's pretended liking for the painter. There was a cessation of hostilities. The great subject of interest was Laure's approaching marriage. The day was not yet fixed; an uncle of the vicomte's — rich of course — was very ill, and while he remained in so delicate a state of health his affectionate young relative could not think of celebrating his marriage. However, a bouquet or a *bonbonnière* was delivered each morning at his beloved's door, as a proof of the ardor of his flame and the good condition of his purse.

But Olga had not forgotten Jean's insinuations. She watched Ivan, and she watched Marca, too. Had she seen the faintest cause of alarm she would immediately have decided the girl's marriage with Maxime. But Marca, whose open face showed every passing emotion, was so evidently enamoured of her handsome cousin that it was ridiculous to suppose that she had even thought of Mr. Nariskine as a possible husband. Yet had Olga cared to look more deeply into the feelings of her adopted daughter she would have discovered that Marca's love for her cousin had changed in character slightly; she no longer admired blindly all he did and said,— she even lectured him at times, very gently.

As to Ivan, he was less constantly by Olga's side than he had been heretofore. His success had suddenly made him popular. The Paris world is always eager to claim new reputations as its own, and to make a hero of every new great man. Sometimes a freak of fashion suddenly makes of the great man of yesterday an unknown of to-morrow; but this was not likely to be Ivan's case. Invitations poured in upon him; and Olga, proud of his success, wished him to accept them. He had received a first medal, and there was talk of giving ing him the red ribbon. The pictures which for years had remained unnoticed in his studio were bought, one after another. The merest sketches attained fabulous prices; art critics, pretending vast admiration for his original talent, rummaged among his drawings to find something as a *souvenir* which some years later, together with other *souvenirs*, might bring in a pretty penny at a sale in London or elsewhere. Ivan was astonished and pleased; his head was a little turned, perhaps, but certainly this sudden success was a phase of life singularly delightful, after the weary years of waiting, of dire poverty and bitter sadness. It seemed to him that so far he had lived in half obscurity, looking out upon the world as through a prison loophole, and that suddenly he found himself out in the open country, flooded with sunshine. No wonder his head was a little turned.

He made many acquaintances, and some friends, during those pretty months of May and June. He was received in more than one charming artistic home. Such lovely homes as they were! — full of the beautiful superfluities painters love. Life was easy to most of these successful men, and they delighted in opening their houses to intimate friends. There was no stiffness; no formal invitations were given; but easy talk around a well-served table was an almost every-day occurrence, here or there.

There was one of these charming houses where Ivan liked especially to go; it was the house of a painter, a foreigner like himself, whose young wife gave a great charm to the informal gatherings; two lovely children completed the family group. Ivan, after these pleasant evenings, would go back to his bachelor rooms a little sad and disheartened; the laugh of the children and the gentle talk of their mother lingered in his ears. She, like most happy wives, was an incorrigible matchmaker, and she could not understand why Ivan should not "marry and be comfortable," as she expressed it.

"I am not fit to be married," Ivan would answer.

"Nonsense! — on the contrary, you would make a model husband. You see, I am selfish — I want you to have just such a home as ours; your wife is sure to be charming, and we should be great friends!"

But he would shake his head, and she could get nothing further out of him.

The picture Ivan had begun in the baronne's greenhouse had remained untouched since the opening of the *salon*, and the painter was not a frequent visitor. At first, Olga found this natural enough; she enjoyed her lover's new popularity; she encouraged him to accept invitations and to make new friends. At last, however, she found that he obeyed her in this respect rather too willingly. The society of artists and poets, which he liked best, was a society which she did not frequent; she was curious about it, and asked him many questions, wanting to know whether the women he met were pretty, whether they were really ladies, or whether all his new friends were not in reality very "bohemian" in spite of silks and gilding and glittering outsides. Soon she found that his answers were evasive. Until now Ivan had been wont to show her his most intimate thoughts, to bare his heart before her. She felt that it was no longer so.

Then she grew afraid. She had staked her all on this one throw. Ivan was necessary to her; he belonged to her, and must not escape. She did not yet acknowledge to herself that he was actually escaping from her; but what she saw clearly was that the life he led took him away from her immediate influence. For this she must find some remedy.

The remedy proved to be very simple. Midsummer was fast coming upon them. Olga determined to go at once to her country house, which had been enlarged and freshly furnished. She would have liked to shut herself up there alone with her painter; but that was not to be thought of, so she determined to fill the house with guests. Her brother-in-law and all his family, including the future husband, were to accompany her. The De Vignons were invited for August, and other friends for different periods. Ivan was easily persuaded to leave Paris; he had been idle long enough, and meant to work seriously at his large picture. The facility with which he consented to all her arrangements quieted Olga; there was evidently no great attraction for him in town.

At the beginning of July the country house received its numerous guests. The weather was perfect; the garden and park were full of shade. Olga had left behind her all evidences of her wealth; simplicity was the order of the day: chintz-covered furniture, white curtains,— everything simple, fresh and gay. The ladies' dresses were to be strictly country-like: muslins and linens, plenty of dainty white, without laces or furbelows. Such were Olga's orders; and they were obeyed. Ivan was grateful to her for this simplicity; he hated her wealth, even now that he was no longer a poor and shabby artist.

The house was admirably situated on a hillside, with the garden sloping down to the very edge of the Seine. Beyond the house the hillside was more abrupt and thickly wooded; paths wound in and out among the fine old trees, leading up to the summit, from which the view was magnificent. The Seine, like a glittering silver ribbon, lay in the midst of a smiling country, with many a bend and curve, pretty islands dotting its waters; the great city was seen afar, its domes and pinnacles rising from the light veil of mist which eternally rested on it; then hills, crowned by many a fort, and peaceful fields and tufts of trees, or wide-spreading woods;— all this formed a beautiful panorama, very gay and sunny, as though such things as war and ravages had never come to sadden the pretty environs of Paris.

Ivan was never weary of admiring this view; he came and went, to see it now from this point, now from that. Then he sketched every small detail which struck his fancy: peasants in a field, cows grazing, a crooked tree,—nothing came amiss, and his album was soon quite full. Often he remained in the park, which was very large, and full of pretty nooks and corners—an ideal place for lovers in search of solitude.

Marca one day suggested this idea rather maliciously to Laure, who played her part of *fiancée* very prettily indeed. But on this occasion, as the two girls happened to be alone, she concluded that it was useless to continue that little comedy.

"Much use I have for your 'poetic nooks.' I wish it were all over; I wish I were married, so as not to have to think of it any more. I see no fun in this forced love-making; we are expected to be lover-like, and of course we are too well brought up to disappoint such expectations. The affectionate relatives look at us with moistened eyes, and whisper, so that we may hear, 'Real turtledoves, are they not?'"

"Why do you marry Monsieur des Granges if you do not care for him?"

"How can I tell whether I care for him or not? Mamma says I am sure to care for him when I am his wife. I hope so. He does not displease me—that is certainly something. He is amiable, and when he does not think it necessary to be sentimental he amuses me, rather. But when the others discreetly leave us five minutes alone, in the moonlight for instance, why then it is insupportable; we have nothing to say to each other — nothing! So you see we do not seek your 'poetic nooks'; take possession of them if you choose, since you are sentimentally inclined. Only I warn you that Maxime is like me; he is not at all poetically minded."

"What do you mean? No — you shall not go. This is not the first insinuation of the kind which I have had to bear; I do not like insinuations. Be frank, and tell me what you mean."

Marca held her cousin firmly by the hand; she was determined to make her speak.

"All I mean is this, since you wish to know: do not take Maxime's light love-making for more than it is worth. I assure you that I am speaking to you as a friend. At first I disliked you; but my fortune is made, and I am indulgent to others."

"Is it Maxime who commissioned you to say this, or your mother?"

"Neither one nor the other. It is a bit of personal advice — that is all. You fancy yourself in love with Maxime; if you are wise you will not let him see it too much, for, unless I am greatly mistaken, you are destined never to be his wife."

Thereupon Laure snatched away her hand, and ran down the winding path. Marca did not try to detain her; she remained quite still, leaning against a tree, seemingly absorbed in seeking out the late violets which clustered about the foot of the tree, and which sent up their sweet perfume in the evening air. There are moments in life when certain external things mingle strangely with the thoughts. The strong smell of the woods, made up of emanations from the earth, of the powerful summer verdure, of the many delicate flowers half-hidden in grass and moss, made her almost dizzy; she listened with curious intentness to the noise of the many birds seeking their night's lodging, twittering and quarrelling and fluttering; and above all these sounds she heard distinctly the words, "You are destined never to be his wife." She could not keep them out of her mind.

Then she recalled all her past life. She remembered that she was nothing — nobody; that she had no right to the name she bore; that she had never even known her real name. She was Cinderella; a fairy had changed her rags into silks and laces; but a touch of the wand might once more change these and make them into rags again. The prince would not recognize her, and would let her go on her way, alone and sad. Tears ran down her cheeks unnoticed; for she knew during that moment that in spite of all his faults she loved Maxime, and could never love but him. She was very sorry that fate had made of her a Cinderella.

Evening was gently falling upon the earth; the birds were hushed into sleep; there was no sound save the faint rustle of leaves in the soft evening breeze. Soon, however, there was another sound: that of a man's tread in the tiny path; but Marca did not hear it, so absorbed was she. Ivan was close by her side before she guessed his presence.

"You here, Mademoiselle, alone — and sad?"

He was looking at her in astonishment. He had just come in from a long walk, and his sketching materials were strapped on his back; his clothes were covered with dust; he was tired and unkempt. He was certainly not the fairy-tale prince of which all eighteen-year-old maidens dream.

Marca looked at him, and half smiled through her tears. Ivan seemed to her quite old and ugly, but very good and kind to her — just made to be a confidant.

"I am not often sad, but each time that I happen to feel so it always seems to be your fate to console me; you know how to do so, for your life has not always been a happy one."

"Yours is not vague or causeless sadness this time; you have some real sorrow, Marca." He forgot to say Mademoiselle.

"That is true," she said, simply.

He much wanted to ask her what that sorrow was; but he dared not. He felt a tender pity for this child, whose happiness depended on a caprice. He greatly blamed Olga for allowing her to think of Maxime as her future husband. He despised that young man, having a worker's contempt for the gay idler; he only saw Maxime's faults and weaknesses, and he could not see any charm in his frivolous gaiety. Evidently it was on his account that Marca was sad, and he hated him at that moment for the tears he had caused.

"Poor child! poor little girl!" and he took her hand, patting it with awkward paternal tenderness.

"Thank you, Mr. Nariskine," she said, half laughing; "you have cured me; I am no longer sad. Marraine must not guess that I have been crying; she would ask me the reason of these foolish tears — and I could not tell her."

"Could you not tell me?"

"No — not yet, at any rate. It is not very serious, since I can laugh. A little fresh water, and there will be no trace left of my unusual fit of crying. I have almost forgotten it myself. Shall we go down together? They will be wondering what has become of me."

Ivan kept her hand in his, as though to help her down the narrow path. Marca felt comforted; she seemed to have found a big brother, who was kind to her. Olga, from the house, saw them thus hand in hand, as they emerged from the wood. She abruptly left the window, and met Ivan just as he was going toward a small pavilion which he occupied.

"What were you and Marca doing together just now?"

"I met her in the wood, and she was crying. I tried to console her; but I am awkward, and little apt to dry such tears — child's tears they still are."

Olga looked him straight in the eyes; he was perfectly calm, and had evidently said the truth. She bit her lip, angry with herself for remembering Jean's insinuations. She had had an instant's absurd jealousy; this mortified her pride.

"Be careful how you console young girls in their fancied sorrows, my dear Ivan. Others seeing you just now might have fancied you in love with Marca."

CHAPTER XI.

OLGA was too proudly conscious of her own strength not to despise the ordinary precautions of ordinary women. She had said to Ivan that his attentions to Marca might be looked upon as love-making, because the idea of such love was simply preposterous. Ivan must be warned; that done, all would be right. The world is full of small-minded men and women; and superior beings are bound to remember this, and act accordingly.

She had not seen the effect produced by her words, having abruptly left the artist. He went to his room, feeling ill at ease. In love with Marca? — with that little girl whom he had sought to console? What an absurdity! He sat down by the open window, seeking in the great silence of sleeping nature a little calm. He was doubtless over-fatigued; he had walked a great part of the day, and had not returned in time for dinner. He was feverish — so much so, indeed, that he could scarcely control his thoughts. But all he needed was rest. He remained seated by the window, and little by little a feeling of contentment stole over him. He almost forgot that he had meant to reflect on some puzzling question or other. The beauty of the summer night bewitched him. The window opened upon the park; the trees climbed up the hillside, and yonder, quite far off, their outline of deep shadow was sharply defined against the moonlit sky. A perfumed breeze stole along, making the branches shiver with a slight rustling noise, which came whispering musically to the young man's ears. The house, with its many lights, was hidden from his view. He was quite alone, lost in the shadow of the night; and this absolute solitude seemed delightful to him. The fever gradually left him; pleasant, gentle thoughts came to him; he forgot Olga, the world, his art even; he was like a child, over-wearied, falling asleep to the sound of nature's sweetest singing. It was a state of mind which was not sleep, and where the thoughts were yet half-lost in dreams. Then suddenly, without apparent reason, he thought of his friend's happy young wife in her pretty home; he heard her very words: "Your wife will be charming, I know; we shall be great friends and cronies." There arose before him, as in a vision, the picture of a charming interior; a young woman stood in the midst of the dainty luxuries of the drawing-room, receiving his friends; and when this young woman, thus seen in his dream-like vision, turned smiling toward him, he saw that it was Marca.

He rose with a suppressed cry, and shook off violently the drowsiness which had come to him. This was dreadful! He was false to himself, false to Olga — to this grand passion which had crowned his life, of which he had never even thought of being ashamed, so poetic and high had he deemed his love. And now, because he had sat, a stranger, at some happy firesides, because some child's caress had stirred in his heart feelings he had until then ignored, was he for such slight reason to prove a traitor to himself and to this woman, who, with unreasoning generosity, had given her life into his care? It was false, false! He did not love Marca — she was but a child, and he had always treated her as such. He had yielded to a feeling of passing weariness. He had allowed an instant's envy to come into his heart — envy of those who could claim a woman's love before the whole world, a woman called by their name, mother to their children; who were not forced to a life of lies, and clandestine meetings, and feigned indifference. His pride had suffered, because Olga was usually looked upon as his patroness, as a rich woman who had taken a poor painter by the hand and led him on to fortune and to fame. Many small wounds which his dignity had endured, and which he had almost forgotten, suddenly bled anew. Certainly, his love for this woman remained now what it had always been; but, really, she looked upon him too much as her property, her creature. Ah, if she had consented to be his wife he would have remained ever loyal to his love; he never would have thought of comparing her with the younger women who clustered about her — though certainly the difference of age must necessarily be great.

He walked feverishly up and down his room; he was irritated and unhappy. He could not understand how it had come to pass that suddenly, without any sufficient reason, he saw things in their real light. He knew that all these years he had been the victim of his own imagination, and that he had seen in Olga a supernatural creature, whereas she was but a woman, like all other women. He had lived too near her for the last few months to remain under the illusion so carefully maintained till then. He had seen her at all times, during her moments of fatigue, when her beauty fell from her like a mask; he had seen her with the people about her, and had at last understood that her generosity was but indifference, her indulgence contempt. She played with all these puppets, because it was in her nature to play with something. Had he not also been her toy? He stopped, feeling faint and ill.

Then he grew unjust toward Olga, doubting the sincerity of her passion. She had vowed that she had never loved but him, and he had believed this religiously; was it not a mere fable to soothe his pride? What did he know of her past life? He had remained apart, seeing her only when she was separated from her usual surroundings, and hearing but what she chose to tell him of her doings and sayings. Really, he had been too easy a dupe. He now knew life — or thought he did; and he despised himself for his credulity.

Deep down, hidden under all these revolts and injustices, there was a simple truth which he did not or would not see; he preferred accusing the circumstances, Olga's conduct, everything, rather than admit the simple fact that the violent passion he had thought eternal, of which he had made the romance and glory of his artist's life, was a worn-out thing—a weight; that this poetic love, this frenzied passion, was turning out to be the veriest intrigue — a commonplace and vulgar adventure.

This night was a dreadful one to Ivan. Twenty times he was on the point of rushing away, of writing some hurried lines pretending — no matter what. Twenty times he began a letter, and between the lines Olga would inevitably have read the unwritten words — "I love you no more ;" but each time he tore the paper.

The first glow of morning found him still irresolute. He threw himself on his bed and found a little troubled sleep. The first sound which he heard as he woke was the fresh voice of Marca, singing a pretty song to wake the lazy guests. She was picking flowers, which did not interrupt her pretty singing. It seemed to the weary man that the lovely season was personified in this fresh young girl picking flowers for those who chose to take them from her. A mad desire to run to her and ask her to throw to him, with those flowers, a little happiness, took possession of him. But he remained hidden behind his curtains, watching her eagerly, finding her pretty and charming and young;—yes, her youth was her great charm! Olga seemed to him at that moment terribly old and faded.

But his thoughts were abruptly broken in upon by a gay laugh. The song had ceased, and Marca was no longer alone among her flowers. Maxime was by her side. Then the wretched Ivan remembered that Marca loved this foolish fellow, and that soon they were to be married.

Marca's sorrow was quite forgotten—whatever it had been; she had perhaps fallen asleep between two sobs, and had risen to smile at the first sunbeam that kissed her pretty face.

Olga encouraged her guests to dispose of their time as best they liked. An unusual liberty reigned supreme; the young people were not constantly watched and guarded, as young people according to French ideas always should be watched and guarded. The Baronne Amélie looked upon this state of things as highly reprehensible, and half killed herself trying to follow her daughters in their various pleasure excursions. But her scruples were ridiculed even by her husband;—were they not in the country, far from prying friends? So Laure and Claire were carried away by that madcap Marca; they rode and walked and swam to their hearts' content; Maxime and M. des Granges went everywhere with them. Amélie's hatred of Marca grew stronger as the intimacy of her son with that young intruder increased day by day. What the stout lady most disapproved were the swimming parties, which were quite the rage, now that the weather was very warm. A pretty bath-house had been built close to the river's edge, and a cluster of weeping-willows threw their trembling shade over the place.

Here the whole family was assembled toward the end of that day which had begun so painfully for Ivan Nariskine. He sat a little apart, with Olga at his side. All the young people, in severely proper bathing costumes, were playing in the river, laughing, calling out, throwing glittering water-drops at each other. The Seine here was quite solitary, and a long island divided it into two channels.

Ivan's mood had changed once more. He was wearied, but quite calm again. He could not even understand the night's revolts and injustice. It had been an ugly dream, and he had now awakened from it. It was false that he had ceased to love Olga. The subtle charm of this woman had taken him once more. She was that day gentle and feminine; the great heat of the afternoon made her a little languid; her fair hair rested lightly in a fuzzy halo about her forehead; one tiny curl clung to the moist temple; he longed to cut that curl and keep it always. He said to himself that he had never loved her more entirely, more passionately.

"You have worn yourself out with your long walks, Ivan. I allow no illness here, you know. I must watch over you for the future. Besides, you promised to work at our picture; that will keep you among us; you must make us sit, one after the other, in the garden — since out-of-door painting is the fashion just now. Then in the autumn the hot-house shall be changed into a regular studio. Our group must be the great picture of the next *salon*."

He said "yes" — assenting to everything, ready to be led once more by that pretty, long-fingered hand. He was so worn out that the slightest effort seemed too much for him. He was grateful to her for the gentle lowness of her voice, for the frequent pauses in her talk; she understood him so well! A woman's love causes her to find just the mood the loved one needs; — then surely she loved him; and he had doubted it!

The soothing repose for which he was so grateful was suddenly broken in upon by a woman's scream, followed by a terrified confusion. Olga and Ivan the next instant were at the water's edge. One of the young girls was drowning, carried away by the current; at first no one knew which it was; then they discovered that it was Marca. Ivan was throwing off his coat to rush to the rescue, when Olga detained him, saying quietly: "Maxime has nearly overtaken her — he will save the child."

Maxime was a powerful swimmer. He had been the first to notice Marca's danger; while playing in the water she had suddenly lost her presence of mind, and was being carried away by the current; she was struggling awkwardly, and had already disappeared once. Maxime guessed the place where she would rise once more, swam toward it with eager haste, caught her just as she was sinking a second time, and brought her back to shore without much trouble.

All this had taken but a few seconds. All the spectators, after the first screams of terror, had remained quite still, as though they were witnessing some acted drama. It was only when they saw Marca, who had fainted, lifted out of the water, that they seemed to realize what had happened. Ivan took the young girl in his arms, some one threw a cloak about her, and others rushed to the house to have a bed prepared.

Marca's fainting-fit did not last long. She presently opened her eyes, and fixed them on those of the artist; she was greatly astonished to find herself in his arms; but her head soon fell again on his shoulder.

Ivan would have had the way indefinitely prolonged. He scarcely felt the weight of the young girl; he was no longer half benumbed, as he had been all through this warm hazy day; his heart beat violently; the look of two eyes, quickly closed again, had told him all he needed to know. His past life had in very truth faded away; the old passion was a dead and cumbrous thing. He grew angry with himself for having an hour ago yielded to the tyranny of habit. Olga, who walked by his side, spoke to him, and he turned away abruptly, so as not to answer; he was absorbed in the contemplation of the white face so near his. Olga stopped an instant, then concluded that she had been mistaken, that he had not heard her. Ivan was moved by the thought of Marca's past danger — as they all were, indeed. No one could think, without a pang, of a girl dying while her laugh still echoed in the distance.

Half an hour later Marca wanted to get up. There was nothing the matter with her; it was absurd to pretend that she was ill; she talked rapidly, and her eyes were bright.

"It is strange — I scarcely suffered: a moment's strangling, and then it seemed as though I were fainting away quietly, with a great singing in the ears. I was not even afraid; I was so sure Maxime would save me; when I screamed I heard his answering cry. And to think that if he had not reached me in time I should have died thus — with no further suffering — a pretty death, in full joy and happiness, without an illness, with no preparatory sadness. Who knows, Maxime? It may prove to be a cruel service that you have rendered me; — but I am glad to live; everything is bright and beautiful and sweet in life to me."

She kept the young man's hand in hers. He would not be excluded from the room, and had entered it with the women; it seemed his right. He listened with a smile, but he was greatly moved. He had saved Marca, and that seemed to make her his. His heart was tender that day; he loved her, and loved himself in her. She soon fell quietly asleep, still holding his hand, just murmuring:

"I am so glad to have been saved by you, Maxime!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE prospect of spending several months in the country had not been particularly attractive to Maxime. The constant company of white-robed maidens was not the sort of company to which he had been most accustomed. But at the first sign of revolt, Olga had given him a glance which cowed him into silence. His aunt Olga's good graces were very useful to him. Then, in reality, this young fellow — who wished to pass as a Don Juan — was by no means of so violent a nature as he chose to fancy. He was not at all difficult to manage. He liked to go through life with the reputation of a fast man; whereas he was really a good-natured fellow, with vague notions of duty, but inclined to good rather than to evil, endowed with an admirable constitution, almost invariable good temper, and an easy sort of philosophy which was apt always to find out the good points of a situation and to make the most of these.

This sort of philosophy enabled him to escape the boredom he had dreaded. Life at the country house was not disagreeable, even for a young man accustomed to the Paris boulevards. There was a constant coming and going of guests, plenty of excursions of every kind, and frequent dancing in the evening. Horseback rides were all the rage — to Amélie's horror, for, with the best will in the world, she could not hoist herself on a horse's back and follow her daughters in their wild gallops. Had not M. des Granges interfered, she would have forbidden the girls to join in such improper pleasures. Marca was a capital horsewoman; for Madame Langlois had been in the habit of sending her young ladies to the forest of St. Germain, under the escort of a steady old riding-master. Somehow, in all their pleasure parties Maxime and Marca found themselves frequently side by side. Each day Maxime grew more contented with his lot in life. The society of a fresh young girl who showed all her feelings and thoughts with the freedom and innocence of extreme youth was not without charm; it is so rare in French society to be able thus to become intimate with a girl in one's own station of life.

Then Maxime, who had been used to look with contempt on people who spoke poetically of the charms of moonlit nights and bird songs, was quite astonished to find that the feelings inspired by the country were not, as he elegantly expressed it, "all bosh." More than once he felt the softening influence of a summer night, of the murmuring of water gurgling under the drooping willows, of a beautiful sunset; and he felt them all the more when Marca was by his side, and expressed in a few simple words what he had vaguely felt.

Still, he by no means acknowledged that he was falling in love with his pretty cousin. He thought it his right to enjoy the present, without troubling himself about the future. He rarely reflected much about his actions and their possible consequences; his favorite phrase was, "Things always turn out right in the end;" and with this comfortable conviction he went on his way, rejoicing in the sunlight and the sweet perfumes and the merry laughter of this pleasant summer-time.

But all this careless thoughtlessness changed, as by magic, during that moment of anguish when he had asked himself if he could save Marca. Her scream of terror had gone to his very heart; and as he brought her to shore, fainting, that heart had beat as it never had done before, and he knew that she was more to him than all the world beside. All the foolish varnish he had so carefully spread over his nature crackled and disappeared, leaving it —what it ought to have remained always — an honest enough nature, not incapable of real feeling.

The following day, Marca, a little weak still, rested in the shade of a fine tree — the only one that had been allowed to grow close to the house. It was very warm, and the birds were hushed in their leafy retreats; nothing disturbed the summer quiet, save the buzz of insects. Around the lounge on which Marca reclined were many other seats, empty save for the half-cut books or the forgotten strips of embroidery strewed here and there. The ladies were dressing for dinner. Maxime had remained by Marca's side, and was reading aloud some fragments of poetry. To tell the truth, he was reading these fragments very badly indeed. Marca took the book out of his hands, playfully saying: "Do not read any more — talk to me, make me laugh a little."

"That means 'My dear Maxime, you read abominably;' it is quite true. It seems to me that the only result of my education has been to take from me the small amount of intelligence nature bestowed upon me."

"You are unjust toward your teachers. What I mean is this: poetry frightens me; I am, I fear, a very commonplace sort of person; I take pleasure in hearing the music of verses, but the sentiments of the poets astonish more than they charm me. I do not understand the violence of their feelings; affection translated in their language becomes a poetic torment; love is a frenzy, a whirlwind, a torture, something supernatural and sublime. I find in myself no echo of these wild feelings."

"Thank the gods!" exclaimed Maxime with comical fervor.

"But I fear that my ideal of life must be singularly prosaic."

"I am curious to be made aware of your ideal. Explain yourself, little cousin!"

"It is rather difficult to put in words;" and Marca blushed slightly.

"Bah! Well, I will set you a good example, and give you my ideal of life. First of all, I should like a lot of money—a great lot!"

"I wonder if that could be expressed in poetry?" said Marca, laughing.

"All things are possible. But I shall not try, since you own to a certain preference for plain prose. I proceed: Lots of gold, and plenty of laughter and amusements of every kind."

Marca laughed a little; then, after a pause, she said quite seriously:

"If I were a man, I should like to accomplish something great—to be looked up to; oh, I should be so ambitious!"

"Alarming sentiments, those; they almost require the help of a lyre. And since nature kindly made a woman of you, are you still ambitious?"

"Not for myself," she said quickly; then she suddenly stopped, blushing. "Decidedly, it is too difficult to say; let us speak of something else."

"Let me help you out of your difficulty. You mean to say that you would be ambitious—extraordinarily ambitious—for your husband?"

"Yes."

"Then why not say so? All girls dream of the husband a kind providence means to bestow upon them. There, now; since I have cleared the way, let us have that terribly prosaic ideal which poets would despise. I am all ears."

"We may laugh at my ideal—but I am quite serious. I have thought deeply on the subject. I see before me a very simple, uneventful life. I shall never marry a man without feeling that I love him with my whole heart—entirely. I do not dream of loving a hero, or a marvel of any kind—but a man, honest and frank, loving and brave, with natural defects which time will correct, and sterling qualities which need but to be cultivated."

"By some dainty feminine gardener. Go on."

"What I see in the future, above all," Marca went on to say, so absorbed by her thoughts that she scarcely noticed Maxime's small interruptions, "is the great happiness of bestowing happiness—of putting one's own feelings in perfect harmony with the feelings of the loved one; of forgetting oneself in him, of making about him a sweet atmosphere of tenderness and absolute devotion; and as reward, to hear him say: 'My little wife has made life a sweet and holy thing to me,' and thus to pass from year to year, hand in hand, proud of the love inspired and of the love felt, strengthened by that perfect union against all the inevitable sorrows and storms of life."

Her voice, which had trembled a little from the first, grew softer and lower, until it died away in a whisper, which Maxime bent his head to hear. He had taken her hand in his, and would not let it go; he remained quite motionless, as though listening for the far-off echo of the hushed voice. This silence did not trouble them; they understood each other. During those few moments Maxime was transported far from all thoughts of self-interest; he felt that he loved this young girl, who so innocently showed him her heart. He solemnly pledged himself to make her happy, and, for the first time, was troubled within himself, fearing that he could never be worthy of so much candor and such absolute tenderness.

"My little wife," he whispered; but Marca, suddenly alarmed and blushing, started, and would have risen. He forced her gently to resume her seat. "My darling, you see as well as I do that we love each other, and are destined for each other; that for once an arranged marriage becomes a love-match. We have pretended until now not to understand all the plotting that was going on around us; but in spite of this pretence, we understood it all, and we made no sign, because we felt that it was the right and natural thing. Little by little we grew to see with the same eyes, and think the same thoughts. Why should you turn from me, dear Marca? Why should you blush? What harm is there in letting the whole world know that we love each other, and that the sooner we belong one to the other the happier we shall be? I am no poet; I do not know how to put in fine words what I feel for you. I can only say, my darling, I am happy in your love, proud of it, and my heart is full of tenderness and respect.

I fear but one thing—my unworthiness. I tremble before you, asking myself how I can ever dare to take you to my heart and call out to all who will hear me, 'She is mine—she is my wife!'"

"Maxime!" . . . She could say no more; but that was enough. He read in her upturned eyes all he wished to know. There was a short silence—that silence which all lovers know; it seemed to Marca that she heard her heart beat in unison with Maxime's; her hands trembled in his; she was happy, simply and exquisitely happy. Presently Maxime went on, in a low tone:

"I shall always love the river, my little Marca, that river which seemed so cruel to you, and which threw you in my arms. Until then I knew vaguely that I cared for you, but only vaguely; I was proud of what I called my liberty; I was fool enough to say that there was no hurry, and I did not care to go deeply into my own feelings. I always thought of you as my future wife — some day or other — not too soon. In novels the marriage takes place in the last chapter. I can tell you all this now, because I laugh at my own foolishness; ever since I saved you, I feel that you belong to me, and I ask but one thing: that I may become your husband as soon as possible. Are you willing to be my wife? — are you really willing?"

"Yes, Maxime; I am willing." She said it almost in a whisper.

"Then, when we are married, we shall walk along the river bank, quite alone, hand in hand, and listen to the waves telling the story of how they made our happiness."

They had forgotten the whole outer world; one thing alone was real — their love. The twilight was gently falling upon them, soft as a marriage veil, when from the house a sharp voice called out "Maxime!" The young girl started, brought back to real life by that sharp, angry voice. She became quite pale, and looking her lover in the eyes she said rapidly:

"But she will never consent. Why does your mother hate me? What have I ever done to her?"

Maxime shrugged his shoulders a little impatiently. He knew full well that there would be a struggle, and he hated strife of every kind. It was very charming to make love to a pretty girl who adored him, and it was the duty of all those about him to let him make love in peace; he did not understand why stones should be placed in his path; his feet were delicate and dainty, and greatly dreaded all stones. He tried to treat the subject lightly.

"Bah! all that will pass away. She is a little jealous of you on account of her daughters; but when you become her daughter also, she will adopt you as such."

"Maxime, tell me — I must know," said Marca, trembling with excitement. "She reproaches me with my birth. Who am I?— what am I?

You must know; tell me, then. It is my right to know, too,— and no one has ever told me yet. I can no longer be treated as a child. Listen to me, Maxime. I love you; I have let you guess this too easily, perhaps,— but I did not know how to hide it. You are my all — my life. My heart has never beaten but for you, and can never beat for another. But listen! I shall never, never be your wife, if I cannot enter your family proudly; if your parents do not receive me as the only son's wife should be received. Tell me the truth, Maxime — I must know it. Sometimes there are dreadful secrets in families — secrets of shame, for which the innocent suffer as well as the guilty. My father . . . perhaps he committed some crime; perhaps my real name, which I do not even know, is a name to make one shudder. As to my mother — she was sixteen when she died; at sixteen one cannot do wrong; she was a mere child — my poor little mother! Answer me, Maxime; I must know the truth before I can say, 'Take me — I am yours.' "

"My sweet one, be calm. I cannot bear to have you tremble so. All I can tell you is this: You are Baronne de Schneefeld's adopted daughter; that suffices. If to-day the name of Marca de Schneefeld is not legally yours, in a few weeks it shall be; he who is curious about the past may then come and question your husband. Let that suffice."

"But it does not suffice, Maxime."

He closed her mouth with his hand, smiling at her excitement. Many voices were now calling them, and they were forced to enter the house, to join the family group, to talk and answer questions as though nothing extraordinary had happened. To Marca it seemed that she acted and spoke in a dream.

Maxime was soon quite master of himself, and quickly took the tone of those about him, laughing and joking as though nothing serious had passed between Marca and himself. On the whole, he was rather astonished when he remembered how sincerely moved he had been — astonished and pleased; he had more respect for himself than he was wont to have, and most sincerely vowed that he would make Marca a good husband. Loyally he told his story to Olga, and waited for her approbation. She listened to all he had to say, smiling a little enigmatically; finally she said:

"It's all for the best, my dear boy, since I decided when you wore round jackets that you should marry my goddaughter. You choose to make a little romance of this family arrangement; well and good,— that is your look-out, and Marca's. Only, you had best calm your impetuous love a little, as I do not mean to let you marry yet awhile; and as I do not approve of long engagements, it is useless to inform all the world of your flame. I will speak to your father when I deem the moment favorable; then your mother has to be scolded into something like common-sense, for she hates my little Marca, I scarcely know why. I take all that upon myself; you do not care to grapple with the difficulties of life — so enjoy yourself — make love, moderately — and I will do the rest. You may tell Marca that her marriage is decided upon; she need not speak to me on the subject; I do not care to receive the love confidences of a bread-and-butter miss."

Just then a letter was brought to Olga, which caused her to grow a shade paler. She recognized Ivan's hand-writing. His place had been empty at the dinner-table; but his comings and goings were so irregular and eccentric that no one had noticed his absence. Some days he remained at home, working hard at the great picture; at other times he would start off early in the morning, sketch-book in hand, and return sometimes at night, sometimes two days later.

Ivan's note was very short; it said that he felt ill, and fearing a beginning of heart disease, hereditary in his family, he had taken the train for Paris, where he meant to consult a celebrated physician. According to the advice of this doctor, he would either return quietly to the *château*, or go where he should be sent.

The tone of the note was quite natural, and it was evidently written so as to be shown to anyone. Olga handed it to her neighbor, and Ivan's illness became the subject of conversation for a few minutes, until some other subject, more interesting to the majority of the guests, happened to be started. Ivan was by no means necessary to the happiness of these pleasure-seeking, laughter-loving people.

But when she was alone in her room, Olga examined the note with jealous care, and it seemed to her that the writing was even more irregular and nervous than usual. She thought over the events of the past few weeks, and her brow grew dark. The night was waning when she began to write to him — a passionate and violent letter, a letter which called for protestations of an equal passion, or no answer at all. She would wait before judging.

Ivan, from his window, had seen the pretty love-scene under the big tree; he had watched each gesture, guessed each blush and glance. It had been to him an hour of horrible torture. He had dissected, with cruel care, each separate motive of this senseless love which had grown in him with such sudden violence ; he recognized the weariness of a worn-out passion, the longing after a more simple love, which he could acknowledge before all. He knew that little by little his mad passion for Olga had been replaced by an unreasoning aversion, as violent as the love it replaced. He felt very weak and wretchedly small in the midst of these struggles. Ah, if Marca had loved him ! But she did not; she had never thought of him save as an ugly man, quite old in her eyes, to whom she could talk at her ease. He watched her every gesture; it was so natural that she should love the handsome young fellow who had saved her from death! How could she, at seventeen, know that he was mediocre and shallow-natured? Besides, he was perhaps unjust to Maxime; love might make of him another man; certainly he seemed very sincerely in love with Marca — and she adored him. Then why did he remain to look on at a happiness which tortured him? He must go away; he must put a great distance between him and this fair child, who should never know how she had made him suffer. He was slow to move, however, and he remained in the darkness of his room for hours before writing his note to Olga. Then, having given it into the care of a servant, he walked away heavily and wearily, and took the last train for Paris.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE weeks succeeded each other rapidly. Summer was waning; its last dusty and faded days were melting into autumn; and still Ivan did not return. Olga's letter had remained unanswered. Still, after a rather long silence, she had received news of him. The Paris doctor had advised him to travel; he had followed this advice, choosing obscure nooks and corners, and wandering, according to his fancy, here and there. He worked hard, discovering in these unknown villages delicious "bits" and curious types. Everyone knows that the postal arrangements in out-of-the-way places are often defective; the letter might easily have been lost. If Olga did not always find in her lover's correspondence all she sought, she at least was greatly reassured by the easy and familiar tone which the letters, after the first few weeks, assumed; he spoke of his work, of the things he noticed in his long country tramps, of his hopes and ambitions.

Gradually she felt reassured. Ivan's illness was perhaps real, and physical suffering often affects the mind. A short absence was not to be regretted; he would come back to her, refreshed, strengthened, and more than ever convinced that a love such as theirs was above all ordinary changes and petty strife. She was resigned to wait.

The *château* was filled with guests during those early September days. The De Vignon family and other friends filled the place with their laughter and the sound of their high-pitched voices. They tried hard to persuade themselves that they adored country life, whereas their one desire was to reach the fashionable moment of returning to town. While waiting for it they did their best to transplant Paris pleasures, Paris tittle-tattle, and Paris toilettes, into Olga's country house. The days having grown short and the evenings cool, it was quite natural to have dancing and private theatricals until past midnight; these necessitated pretty dresses, in spite of Olga's desire for simplicity. Then there was plenty of gossip in this miniature world. Mme. de Vignon's eternal scenes of jealousy, the betrothal of Laure with young Des Granges, the unavowed but perfectly understood betrothal of Marca with handsome Maxime, the anger of Baronne Amélie and the spider-webs of her lord,— all these things gave plenty of scope for gossip and even for slander. No; these fine people were not as much bored by country life as might have been expected.

In the midst of all this noise and movement, Marca was not quite happy. She rarely found an opportunity of talking quietly and intimately with her lover; she seemed to know him less intimately than before their betrothal. Her great love for him had brought its inevitable change; she was no longer a child, but a loving, gentle woman, capable of self-sacrifice, giving herself up entirely to this new and strange delight, but at the same time requiring a return for her devotion. Maxime had remained what he had always been; he was by no means incapable of momentary tenderness, real and sincere; only he did not require to have these occasions multiplied; life had been given him, according to his theory, to eat, drink, and be merry—especially the latter; and he found that Marca had suddenly grown terribly serious and sentimental. He discovered that it was his duty to be gallant and full of attentions to the feminine portion of his aunt's guests—that is, the younger among these; and he performed that duty with scrupulous care.

Marca, with instinctive pride, drew back, and sought to hide her suffering. There was no one to whom she could confide her thoughts; and it was little by little, after many attempts to convince herself of the contrary, that she at last understood that all Maxime asked of her was in the first place uninterrupted gaiety, and in the second a quiet, comfortable, easy sort of affection, to which he might without much effort respond. As she was yet too young to hide her feelings, Maxime came to the conclusion that she was decidedly romantic; and since it was arranged that the marriage was not to take place for some time yet, his love-making became very intermittent, and he filled up the intervals with half-laughing, half-serious court, first to one, then to the other, of the guests. Mme. de Vignon, in spite of her thirty odd years, accepted his gallantries, partly because they amused her, partly because her husband showed on all occasions a great partiality for Marca.

One evening charades were in progress in the drawing-room. Marca had refused to join the improvised troupe, and sat apart. She was quite pale and sad; she seemed to have lost her youth — her good looks especially, for Marca's beauty was a thing made of sparkle and color and expression more than of perfection of feature.

"What is the matter, dear?" said Claire, caressingly. She was very fond of Marca, and delighted at the idea of having her as sister-in-law — especially delighted at having been chosen as confidante in this love affair.

"I should like to have a good cry."

"Why?"

"Do you know what Marraine just said to me as she passed?"

"It could not have been anything very terrible, for as she spoke she smiled."

"I fear her smile, Claire; I fear it more than her anger. She said: 'You have a part to play; your duty is to be young and pretty, to laugh and make others gay; try and play that part better than you have done for some time past. I am not pleased with you. I wish for no wounded soul, no plaintive maiden, in my house.

Try and understand, and act accordingly.' I could not help saying, 'Marraine, I am not very happy; how can I laugh and be gay?' But she pretended not to hear, and went her way smiling, just glancing at me with cold irony. Does she not love me? A mother would have listened, would have answered."

"I suppose it is her way," said Claire, seeking for something consoling and not finding it. "After all, if she did not care for you she would scarcely give you so many fine things — and let you marry Maxime!"

But Marca said no more. She was listening intently to the sound of voices behind the improvised theatre curtain; she distinguished the mellow accents of Maxime mingling with the shrill soprano of Madame de Vignon. Certainly Marca was not jealous of this coquette; but she could not understand what pleasure Maxime could find in this constant and ridiculous flirtation. As she listened, she began to wonder whether she had not been foolish to place her ideal of life too high; whether, if she were to lower herself to Maxime's level, he would not love her better. Since eternal laughter was necessary to his happiness, why, she would try to laugh with him. She knew full well that he had real affection for her, that he cared for no one in the world as he cared for her; on the rare occasions when they found themselves alone, he was really her lover;— why should she ask for more, and seek to elevate a nature that by no means desired to be elevated? With every young and honest-hearted girl a first love awakens a desire for great and heroic things; she tries to see in the man she loves a superior being, whom she can worship, to whom she looks up. When she understands that, in order to keep the love of this man, she must seek, instead of ennobling her own nature, to debase it, the suffering which this conviction brings with it is acute.

"It would do me good to cry," again murmured Marca.

"Do nothing of the sort, my darling; aunt Olga is coming back toward us. Just look! Mr. Nariskine is by her side,—the great man has deigned to return to us inferior beings. He is uglier than ever, now that he is sunburnt. I hate geniuses—don't you? They are too much absorbed by the contemplation of their own superiority to think of small-natured people! At any rate, aunt Olga is not of my opinion; she is beaming as she does not beam even for dukes and princes. What it is to be a genius! I suppose she does not notice how awkward he is; he never will know how to enter a drawing-room!"

"I think Mr. Nariskine very interesting looking, very manly—and that is more important in a man than mere good looks."

"Dear me! I thought you had a weakness for handsome curly-headed young fellows!"

Marca blushed a little by way of an answer;

in her heart she wished handsome Maxime had a few of the ugly painter's qualities.

Just then the curtain rose, and the charade began. There were but two actors on the stage — Madame de Vignon and Maxime; she personated a young widow, he a gay Lothario, who had followed the lady, taking her for what she was not — which was not to be wondered at, thanks to Madame de Vignon's manner of acting; the whole ended by a declaration and a request for the gay widow's hand. They did not play very badly, on the whole, but the scene had been hastily arranged, and was dreadfully wanting in wit and in general interest. The actors seemed to enjoy themselves, however, if the audience did not, and gave full scope to their coquetry and their desire to attract attention.

The *salon* was nearly full, and all the ladies revenged themselves for their long waiting by ill-natured remarks about the actors, exchanged in a low voice, even while, with their gloved hands, they gently applauded.

"Just look at that poor De Vignon, my dear! A true philosopher. What a well-trained husband!"

"Look rather at the pretty affianced bride! — it seems she is already jealous; what will it be later? If she takes such things to heart she will not have two months of happiness. I wonder Olga does not understand this, if she really cares for Marca. Why does she want this marriage to take place?"

"Why? You are *naïve*, my dear. Simply so as to humble all the family. The adventuress is revenging herself!"

Several of the men came and went among the groups, trying their best to seem interested in the charade, which the inexperienced actors dragged to an unconscionable length, not finding the ending they sought; smothered conversations went on here and there. Ivan overheard the talk about Marca; Olga had left him, and from where he stood he could study the young girl's face.

He had come back thinking himself quite cured, and resolved to act as any honorable man should act in such a case. Absence helping, he had convinced himself that his love for Marca was but a passing fancy. He wished to study his own feelings with regard to Olga before breaking forever the chain which bound him to her. If he grew quite convinced that his love was really dead, then he would not hesitate; he would go away, very far, and they should meet no more. Only before taking this decisive step he wished to be quite sure. Should he find Marca as he had left her, happy in her love for Maxime, she should never guess that in a moment of madness he also had loved her.

The women's chatter fell upon his ears, startling him out of his quietude; and he looked toward Marca. While the two would-be actors were performing their last sentimentalisms, which the audience, a little roused by the feeling that the end could not be far off, approved by murmurs of "Charming!—quite delightful!—what cleverness!—it could not have been better played at the *Français!*" his anger against Maxime, against Olga, who permitted this marriage, grew stronger and stronger. He understood that his cure was not a real cure, but that he loved this little girl, and that he longed to take her to his arms and call her "wife." His love was mingled with great and tender pity. He had but to study that young face to guess all her efforts to keep back the tears; he saw that she had grown thinner and paler, that the first freshness of her youth had left her. . . . All hesitation was now at an end; he would do all in his power to protect this helpless girl. She still fancied herself in love with her handsome cousin, that was evident; but a love which is not built on mutual esteem is a love doomed to inevitable death. He would open her eyes; he would try to supplant his unworthy rival, and that without the slightest scruple. He would do more; he who during all these years had suffered cruelly from the dissimulation which his false position had made necessary, would become really a hypocrite; he would act a part with Olga, so as to have every opportunity of approaching Marca—and that also without the slightest scruple.

These thoughts had passed rapidly through the painter's mind. He had quite regained his self-possession before the inevitable applause had died away. Then there came a general moving of chairs and rustling of skirts. Marca was doing her best to obey her godmother; she went from group to group, trying to smile and chatter. The painter was standing by Olga when the young girl welcomed him back with a hearty hand-shake and a few pleasant words. Olga, who was watching the two, was satisfied; nothing could have been more unaffected, more cordial, and less lover-like, than this meeting.

The evening passed away without other incident. Maxime, to whom his aunt said a few words as she passed, seemed quite astonished that his lover-like ardor should be questioned; he had been told not to pay his court too openly, and as he was by nature obedient, he had acted accordingly. But since the reverse was not expected of him, he kept by Marca's side manfully. The young girl, who asked for nothing more, grew happy and bright again. Thus, all things seemed in perfect harmony at the very moment when, for the first time, that harmony was seriously menaced.

CHAPTER XIV.

OLGA was ill at ease, not to say out of temper. She had sent all her guests off on some excursion, and was alone. She stood by the window, looking out upon the dull grey sky, and upon the trees, many of which had already lost their leaves. She listened to the moaning of the wind among the yellow shrubs.

She was saying to herself that life is but one long deception, even when one has triumphed over one's adversaries, when one has fortune and beauty. She would have liked at that moment to find herself in some far-away land, among strangers. Faces too well known wearied her. She had chosen to bend all wills to hers — and she had done so: really, it was too easy a thing; with money — plenty of money — one is all-powerful.

She remembered the day when, her husband by her side, she had stood at this same window looking out upon the lawn, where a child of four years tumbled about and played with little peasants — seeming herself a peasant. She remembered her hesitation, scarcely knowing whether it would be wise to take this child out of her natural sphere or not; whether or not she would make of her a rich heiress, an instrument of vengeance to be used in due season, to humble and crush those who had called her an adventuress. It seemed to her that she still heard the words of Baron Max —"It would perhaps be better than making of her an intruder"—words which had put an end to her indecision.

She had fancied that when she had seen Marca grown into a pretty and lively girl she should feel some affection for her. She wished to feel this affection. But it had not come to her. She had already spent some months in examining this new toy, and the toy no longer amused her. Little by little she had grown quite indifferent to the girl. Now the indifference was becoming something else. She wanted to get rid of Marca — she was tired of seeing her. Several causes had contributed to bring about this state of feeling. In spite of some momentary paleness and want of sparkle, Marca was developing into beauty ; and doubtless she would in a few years be prettier still. In her all was full of promise. Olga, who for years had seemed to defy time, was suddenly growing old. She had discovered some white threads in her hair, and signs of fatigue were sometimes visible on her face. Marca's extreme youth irritated her.

She had grown weary also of this noisy, brilliant life she had led for months past. It should cease. Leaning her forehead against the window-pane, she dreamed of another sort of life. Soon she would cause the two marriages to take place — that of Laure and that of Marca. She meant to be generous, very generous; what did she care about money? Then she would go away, very far, to be alone with Ivan. She closed her eyes, the better to see the paradise she dreamed of; she almost felt the warmth of the southern sun; she almost smelt the delicious odor of the orange and citron groves; she almost saw the deep blue of sky and sea, and the greyish hue of the olive trees. She had been foolish to bring her lover into this frivolous French world, where he never could feel at home, where he was no longer quite himself.

Then she suddenly remembered a book she had read long ago, which had struck her as a singularly living picture, a cruelly realistic study. It was the story of two lovers, whose love had worn itself out, yet who did not know how to confess it; they were constantly falling back into their passion, which then almost immediately wearied and irritated them. This little story, called "Adolphe," which she had about forgotten, now came back to her with great vividness: why? Then the thought struck her that this man — who, through all his fluctuations tried to act as a man of honor, who found himself in a false position, from which he did not know how to free himself — spoke and looked and acted as, for some time past, Ivan had acted, looked, and spoken.

She started nervously. No; this monstrous thing was false — must be false! She loved him still so passionately — with a love which must surely awaken an answering echo in his heart! He had so worshipped her; she had been more to him than a beloved woman merely — she had been muse and goddess. As in a flash she perceived that during these past months the goddess had been seen too familiarly, and, having stepped from her pedestal, had become indeed a mere woman.

More than ever she was determined to tear Ivan from this foolish world, where he felt ill at ease. Once far away, alone with her, his old adoration would come back to him.

"My dear Olga, may I request a moment's interview?"

In a second she had regained all her presence of mind, and said to her brother-in-law: "I thought you had gone out with the others, Jean!"

"As I was preparing to mount I received a a dispatch. Eugéne des Granges informs me that his uncle is no more; he arrived just in time to receive his last embrace."

"And his inheritance as well, I trust."

"And his inheritance as well," repeated Jean, with the faintest of smiles; adding, "which is an important one. Laure makes a fine match — thanks to you, my dear Olga; your aid came just at the right moment. But it is not only as a bearer of sad, but of good news, that I allowed myself to interrupt your meditations; it is also to say that my wife thinks we would best return to Paris at once, in order to make all necessary preparations. The marriage might take place in two or three months — sufficient mourning, I should say, for an uncle, even a rich one. That would bring us to December; Paris is quite itself again toward that time, and we wish to have a grand wedding. We are determined to spare nothing on this occasion; Laure's future requires it. Then it may facilitate the establishment of Claire — and Maxime."

Olga turned slowly upon him, and forced his naturally evasive eyes to rest upon hers.

"Maxime's marriage need not cost you a moment's anxiety. He is to marry Marca. We shall celebrate the two weddings together; it will be very nice. Marca will then be eighteen; it is young, but still a very suitable age. In a week we shall all be at home again in Paris. You may go when you choose. I give you eight days to make up your mind, and force your wife to accede to my will. Monday next, at this very hour, you will be kind enough to call upon me with Maxime, and ask for my goddaughter's hand."

"Maxime scarcely seems to me capable of making a wife quite happy; leave him a year or two of liberty."

"I will leave him three months — neither more nor less. As to their happiness, that is their affair, not mine — or yours. They chose to play at being lovers this summer; they must now take their play in earnest. It is useless to discuss this thing any more; it is decided — and shall take place."

Never before had Olga been quite so haughty. The bitterness of her past meditations made her voice hard, her look inflexible. Yet even to such persons as Jean de Schneefeld there comes a moment when one must assume a little dignity or despise oneself forever after.

"It is possible, however, that this marriage may never take place;" and this time he looked Olga straight in the eyes.

"Tut — my dear fellow, you talk nonsense. Resistance to my will would prove too costly a luxury. You think, perhaps, that if you succeed in putting Marca aside the fortune your brother left me is sure to go back to you, and that the heiress Maxime might marry would, on the other hand, add to that fortune. You mistake. I will found a hospital for stray dogs rather than leave my money to those who go against my wishes."

"But there is still another phase to that marriage question," said Jean, softly. "Maxime is not the only one who has noticed and admired Marca. The girl does not yet know her own mind. Leave her at least the time to discover whether she really prefers a handsome young man, who certainly will pass quite unnoticed through life, or — an eminent artist, who is already famous and is destined to become more so."

"This is not the first time, Jean, that you have insinuated this;"— Olga was perfectly calm —"but be quite at ease on that score. I have observed the two, and I can assure you that Marca is no more in love with Mr. Nariskine than he is with her."

"I have observed them, also, and am much less convinced than you seem to be of their mutual indifference. Mr. Nariskine left your house suddenly, having convinced himself that Marca really cared for my son. On his return, he saw that Maxime was less lover-like than he used to be, and that Marca had grown pale and sad; he no longer thinks travelling necessary to his health."

Olga, in spite of all her efforts, grew very white. There was a moment of painful silence; then she repeated:

"You are mistaken; but were you not, I should not for so little a thing change my plans. Marca shall marry her cousin three months hence."

"Well, then,—permit me, as a father, to touch upon certain delicate questions, which it is impossible to leave quite aside."

"Which means—money affairs. Since the pill is hard to swallow, I will gild it. What do you require?"

Jean had often meditated over the answer he should give to such a question; still he hesitated, trying to guess from his sister-in-law's expression how far he might venture to stretch his pretensions. At last he said, lowering his voice, as one instinctively does on solemn occasions:

"In Maxime's position, with his handsome face and pleasant manners, he might aspire to the hand of a well-born girl, even if that hand held more than a million — two, perhaps. Now Marca is not well-born."

"And for that reason I give her three millions."

Jean had not expected such regal generosity. Had Olga at once said what her intentions really were he would have watched with less interest the growing love of the painter. However, he merely bowed, and presently said in his softest drawling tones:

"You have always spoken of your adopted daughter as your heiress; this marriage would but strengthen your resolution, I fancy."

"I take no engagement on that score; but it is probable. However, I trust to keep my heiress waiting as long as possible. What you may take for granted is that Claire, when she becomes Marca's sister-in-law, may expect a wedding present equal to that which I have given to Laure. Now that all is understood between us, go and enjoy the mingled fury and delight of your amiable spouse. I wish to hear nothing more of the affair for eight days. Then, and then only, I shall prepare Marca for the joy that awaits her;" and she dismissed him with a haughty gesture.

The signal of departure was welcome to all. Country life seems insupportable to Parisians after the first yellow leaves. Madame de Vignon especially sighed for her dear Paris. One day, when she was in all the flurry of her preparations, her lord, left consequently a little more to himself than usual, sauntered into the drawing-room, where Marca happened to be alone, sorting her music. He sat down near her.

"How everything comes to an end, hey? One comes, one goes! It is as though one had not been. Quite like life, is it not?"

"What lugubrious talk, Monsieur de Vignon! Have you been reading the German philosophers this evening?"

"I'm not overmuch given to reading the philosophers of any nation. But there are moments when one stops to think a bit — birthdays, for instance. I am forty-eight years of age since this morning, and I was wondering whether I had had in all forty-eight hours of happiness. It is all my fault, of course; but you know it's not any the more consoling for that. If I had a son I should say to him: 'My boy, look at me,— listen to the story of my life, and be very careful to do just the opposite.' But I never had a son — only girls, nothing but girls. Do you think they will inherit the — hum !— the great faculty for rapid talk which distinguishes their mother? If so, I should choose deaf men as their husbands."

While talking, M. de Vignon had been examining Marca through his eye-glass with such persistency that she felt quite ill at ease; he noticed this, and said, softly:

"Pardon me — I am very rude. But I was

thinking likenesses are such odd things, as we all know. You are not aware, perhaps, that we lost our eldest daughter. Well, I cannot help fancying that I see her in you; not one feature, perhaps, is exactly like a feature of hers,—but when you look at me so, it seems to me that it is my darling's eyes that are fixed on me. It was I who took care of her — my wife was ill at the time; she loved me well, my wee girl, and she died in my arms. She had not yet learned that I was a ridiculous sort of fellow, who had not known how to make something out of his life. Certainly her eyes were like yours."

He rose and walked about, more moved than he cared to appear. Then he suddenly went up to Marca and took her hands in his, saying hurriedly, while with a jerk of his eyebrow he got rid of his glass:

"You are happy just now; you have everything a girl needs — even to a lover; so that what I want to say seems ridiculous — like myself. But really now, if you should ever need a friend Maurice de Vignon would be proud to be that friend. Remember it."

Then, as though he feared a conjugal apparition, he hurried from the room. Marca looked after him in mute astonishment.

CHAPTER XV.

THE "getting home," after an absence of some months, is always a delightful sensation. Marca felt keenly what we have all experienced — the new look of familiar objects. She went about the Paris house like a curious child. It seemed to her that the colors of furniture and draperies were more intense. Her eyes, grown unaccustomed, now discovered in every object a sort of individuality. She took pleasure in examining every picture, every pretty knick-knack; each seemed to welcome her, to tell her that she was really "at home." She revelled in the harmonious combination of colors, in the soft richness of the silky stuffs which fell in such heavy folds. She had always instinctively loved pretty things; but now that her artistic education had been perfected, that love had grown to be a sort of passion. The sight of ugly, ill-shaped objects, the hideous aspect of misery, affected her painfully, almost physically. Her godmother laughed at her pretty fastidiousness, her costly fancies; she remembered with satirical pleasure the origin of this dainty little aristocrat. At such moments the fine theories of inherited instincts seemed to her mere foolishness. Her forefathers had been "hewers of wood and drawers of water." Marca had delicate hands, long and white, which a princess might have envied. It is true, the unknown father wore fine furs.

"What are you doing, Marca, trotting about from room to room, and smiling to yourself?" asked Olga, some days after their return.

"I am admiring; I have done nothing but admire since we have been at home. It seems to me that until now I never quite understood how beautiful it all is—that the perfect arrangement of a house is a poem. Everything is harmonious, and forms an ideal whole."

"Artistic taste can be bought, my dear, like all other things in this life,—if one only has money enough."

"It is a fine thing to be very, very rich, is it not?" Marca said this with such a serious air—as though she had suddenly discovered some great truth, unknown till then—that her godmother laughed.

"You think so, do you? Then, for your own part, you have no wish to be turned back into a poor little ragged Cinderella?" She said this still smiling, but Marca thought the smile a cruel one, and shuddered slightly.

"Oh Marraine!" and she grew quite pale.

"Foolish child! Do I look like a wicked fairy? Know, young lady, that I have been working lately at that frail edifice called your happiness. As long as you play the part assigned to you, you have nothing to fear from me."

Olga was seated now — and she never occupied a seat without seeming a queen on her throne; so at least thought Marca. The young girl had let herself fall on a cushion at her sovereign's feet. She was glad to be thus alone with her — a thing which rarely happened now-a-days.

"It seems to me sometimes, Marraine, that you are not quite satisfied with me — and I should so like to please you! Without you I am nothing; were you to take your protecting arm from around me I should fall to the ground. I know this very well. Yet it is not fear which prompts me to speak thus — I feel quite secure in your generous kindness. But I want more still — your affection, which I seem powerless to win. There must be something very wrong or incomplete in me, since I have not yet succeeded in doing so. Dear Marraine! — I know that you hate 'scenes,' but there is nothing of the sort in this case; I am talking to you quietly; I do not mean to cry or make a fuss; I am quite calm. You speak of the part I have to play; I fear that I do not quite understand what you mean by that. I had always thought that in a daughter's duty — and I am like your daughter, am I not?—there should enter affection, and caresses, and a little nonsense even;—and see how foolish I am! I dare not act as a daughter should act — indeed, Marraine, I dare not."

"You are a good little girl, Marca, and I am certainly fond of you; but affection with me is a quiet sentiment, which does not require expansive demonstrations; but it is none the less affection. I mean to prove that I am really a mother to you. Listen: You love Maxime; in three months you are to be his wife; your marriage is to take place the same day as Laure's."

Marca started up, and stood quite straight and stiff; there was no color in her cheeks. Olga looked at her in astonishment; she had never thought the child capable of so much emotion.

"In three months . . . " she repeated the words several times, almost unconsciously.

"Certainly," answered Olga. "I fancy that the idea of being his wife is not an unfamiliar idea to you. Was there not some love-making and exchanging of vows this summer? Have you ceased to care for him?"

"No—no, Marraine. It always seemed to me quite natural and right that I should marry him — some day. But I thought of it as something far off, quite dim in the distance — a little like the 'when I am grown up' of children. But three months hence! Does he really love me? Will his family consent to receive me as a daughter? Why does his mother turn from me? One would say that some shameful story . . ."

She stopped, fearing to cry,— remembering, even in the midst of her strong emotion, that her godmother hated "a fuss."

"Everything is pleasantly and comfortably arranged, my dear; you are not only to be endured, but to be received with open arms." And as Marca looked at her with astonished eyes, she continued: "Did you not acknowledge yourself, just now, that wealth was the greatest of all magicians?"

"You buy me a husband!" Marca was no longer pale; her face crimsoned with shame.

"Since I can no longer buy you a doll!—reserve your virtuous indignation for a better occasion. Your case is that of nearly all girls in our world. Do you think that Laure would be on the point of becoming 'vicomtesse' if I had not doubled her fortune? You and Maxime have played at being in love—continue your pretty game; money affairs are kept out of your ken—others attend to them for you. Be grateful and happy as long as you can."

"You are very good and generous, Marraine;" but there was no longer the spontaneity and youthful enthusiasm which a little while before had nearly touched Olga. She turned abruptly and looked into the young girl's eyes.

"Has your freak changed? Have you some new fancy which has taken the place of that first fancy of yours?"

"Oh no, Marraine!" Marca was alarmed—the look of those clear light eyes was so cruelly luminous.

"I have been told that Maxime was not the only one to have made love to you. Is it true? Answer. There would be nothing astonishing in such a thing;—you are supposed to be rich."

"No one else has made love to me—or

thought of me, that I know of." She was so frankly astonished at the question that Olga was a little ashamed of her violence. "That is," added the young girl, smiling, "when his wife is out of the way Monsieur de Vignon does look at me a great deal, while sucking his stick-knob. But then, I could not marry him, could I?"

Olga took a long breath. There was no possibility of doubting Marca's perfect truthfulness. She grew quite affectionate, and patted the girl's cheek.

"What a naughty child! Take care how you excite Madame de Vignon's jealousy! She will be putting poison in your wine some day." She laughed, then went on more seriously: "We shall be very busy during these coming months. In the first place, you must give Mr. Nariskine all the sittings he requires."

"It is so tiresome to sit! He pretends that I am very difficult, and he makes me sit more than the others. It is not fair!"

"I wish my picture to be his best work; therefore you will be pleased to sit whenever he asks you to do so." She said this severely.

"Yes — yes — Marraine; I will do anything, so that you do not frown at me!"

The very next day, Marca was ordered to give a long sitting in the winter garden, which Nariskine had transformed into a painting-room. He worked feverishly. His picture was now almost finished. He had made a number of sketches from Marca, but had never quite succeeded in pleasing himself; now he was working seriously at the painting of her figure on the large canvas.

Olga, dressed for visiting, was buttoning her gloves, while making some slight criticisms upon the light and shade of the face. She was looking well, and very handsome, that afternoon; a slight flush made her seem remarkably young.

"I am going to leave you," she said quietly. "I have a visit to make, but I shall be back in an hour. I expect my brother-in-law, who has an important communication to make to me, it seems."

Marca felt herself grow red, then very pale. She guessed what that communication was. It was cruel to make her sit on such a day . . . but Olga did not appear to notice her agitation, and, smiling quietly, she left them, saying:

"I have given orders that you should not be disturbed; so work well till my return."

She seemed in no hurry; as she crossed the drawing-room, she stopped to pick a flower; then she disappeared.

Scarcely had she shut the door behind her, when her expression changed. Her smile was gone; a straight fold between the eye-brows gave her a hard and cruel look. She hurried to her own room, quickly took off her silk dress and put on a woollen gown, dark and soft, then slipped on thin shoes which made no noise.

Everything had been carefully prepared beforehand; high, wide-leaved plants formed an almost impenetrable screen. In order to get close up to the painter and his model, and stand behind that screen of verdure, Olga had, with her own dainty hands, by removing plants here and there, contrived a narrow alley; this path led from her room window, which opened on the conservatory, to within a few steps of Nariskine.

She slipped along with infinite precautions — scarcely breathing, growing pale when by chance a leaf struck her face as she passed. Everything had been prepared by her for the accomplishment of her design. The few words uttered as she left to pay her pretended visit had been carefully studied; she knew that they would be understood. If Ivan indeed loved Marca he would not fail to improve this last opportunity of telling her of his love. If Maxime were once openly accepted he would be forced to resign himself. She would not believe Jean's perfidious insinuations; she despised them, yet she wanted to be surer still — to hear, to see for herself.

She was angry with herself when she found that the violent beating of her heart caused a haze before her eyes, a din in her ears. The murmur of the little fountain hard by seemed formidable as the roar of a winter torrent. But this tumult soon calmed; she was mistress of herself once more, and all her faculties were concentrated in the eager watching.

There was but a slight screen of foliage between her and the group. She saw but the painter's side face. Marca was just in front of her. The girl was quite motionless; she had certainly never sat so well before; her eyes were cast down, her cheeks were burning; her thoughts were evidently far away — and evidently, too, Ivan had no share in them. There was absolute silence in the winter-garden; nothing was heard save the silvery trickling of the water. Olga breathed more freely; if any words had been exchanged before her arrival they had certainly been words of no importance. She felt that she should never quite forgive herself for having condescended to act the spy. Once she actually turned to retrace her steps. But a fascination kept her at her post. Her eyes, full of dark fire, were fixed on her lover's face. It seemed to her that he was pale, and that his fingers trembled; but she was not sure of this.

Suddenly Ivan threw down his brushes. Marca looked up in astonishment.

"You quite frightened me! What is the matter? You cannot complain of your model to-day, it seems to me."

"You sit too well."

"Do you know that great painters are not easily satisfied — they are a fantastic race!" She tried to smile at him, but her lips trembled.

"The Baron de Schneefeld is coming this afternoon, in state, to ask for the honor of calling you daughter-in-law; is he not? . . . . Do not be angry with me, Marca; this plan of a marriage between Maxime and you is no secret

— for me less than for others. Am I not almost one of the family? a man in no way dangerous, with whom, against all French notions of propriety, you may be left, quite unprotected; whom no one could think of as a possible lover to a pretty girl; who seems older far than he really is; ugly, too,— of no great consequence."

"Or, rather," said Marca gently, "a dear friend in whom we all have great confidence, whom we could not think of treating as a mere acquaintance."

"Then, if you have confidence in me, you will listen to me; you will not be angry even if I say things which must sadden you?"

"I shall not be angry, certainly. But if the topic is painful why should you touch upon it? Believe me, I have thought over all that you could find to say on the subject, many, many times." She sat down, quite wearily.

"You cannot — you must not marry him!" Ivan spoke almost roughly, in a husky voice.

"You mistake. I shall be his wife."

"But you do not love him! My poor child, he has wearied your patience; indeed, you do not love him."

"Listen to me, Mr. Nariskine. I have often heard it said that love is blind; but I do not believe it. I see Maxime's faults quite clearly, yet I love him in spite of them. Think of it; the first time I felt my heart beat with violence, it was for love of him; he came before me as the very embodiment of happiness; and when one is very young one turns instinctively to all that is bright and joyous. I loved him, scarcely knowing what it was to love; but it was once and forever. At first I thought of our probable marriage as of some beautiful dream — something like the ending of a fairy tale, cloudless happiness, an impossible mixture of joy and youth and pretty things — jewels, flowers, wedding veils . . . a child's notion of marriage. But I am no longer a child; I have suffered a little already, and I look toward the future with sobered eyes. Maxime has an excellent heart, but he is a little frivolous, and the easy life he has led so far has given him notions on love and marriage which are not my notions. Still I love him. I see dimly before me days of sadness, jealous tears which I shall do my best to hide, many anxious hours; but all that will pass. The time will come when he will understand that his wife's entire devotion is a thing to appreciate above the foolish pleasures he now prizes. I am willing to wait for that time — because I love him."

"Poor little Marca! poor little girl! yours is an illusion with which all noble-hearted women begin life; that of saving the man they love, by dint of entire devotion. It is only an illusion; but it may sometimes become a reality, when one has to do with a rough nature which needs a softening influence — a nature where there is something to work upon. But it is a mere illusion with a Maxime de Schneefeld; he is unstable, weak in character,— unmanly. Since your betrothal — since that moment when it was given him to save you, to hold you in his arms, — since that moment when, if he was ever destined to change, that change would have manifested itself — what has happened? His one thought has been to forget, in foolish trifling with others, a love which wearied him because it called for earnest love in return. Vanity, a petty, mean vanity, is his one great passion; and he felt humiliated at the contact with a nature far above his own. Oh, I know you! You will try to make yourself little, and humble, by his side; you will endeavor to place him on a throne, and hide yourself in the shadow of his borrowed greatness. But you will not succeed, you poor child; all your magnanimous efforts will be lost. You are preparing for yourself a life of misery, which will give him as little happiness as it can give you."

Marca had risen, pale and trembling. She tried several times to stop this torrent of words, uttered with feverish rapidity; but in vain. Ivan was carried away by the passion he no longer cared to hide. At last she cried:

"By what right do you say these things?"

"By the right which my great love gives me!" He had seized her hands and forced her to look at him. "Yes — I love you, Marca,— I love you, do you hear? I have measured that love of mine with the paltry feeling of your paltry lover. I have followed him, and pried into his life, and counted his low and shameful sins; for I wanted to know what manner of man it was who had won that inestimable treasure — your young heart. And I do know. Believe me when I tell you, Marca, that if I had found in this pretty fellow one spark of real manliness, one generous impulse, if I could have said to myself, 'he is unworthy of her now, but there is some hope that he may grow to appreciate the prize he has won,' I should never have spoken to you as I am now speaking. Believe me, Marca, pray believe me. All this sweet dream of mine — the dream in which I saw at my side a young and gracious presence, a fair wife, at whose feet I should have cast my life, my hopes, my pride, with the patient hope that some day I should hear her dear voice saying, 'My poor Ivan, I do love you — a little!' — that dream of mine should never have been put in words. You should have gone your way, my darling, never guessing that your feet had walked upon my heart. But Maxime is unworthy of you, and I can prove it. You cannot be his wife — you cannot. I will not have you marry him!"

His voice was tremulous with passion. Olga knew those accents. Until then she had listened in a sort of daze, scarcely understanding. It was as though she were under the influence of some cruel nightmare, with the consciousness that the waking moment could not be far off. But now the wretched woman was beginning to understand. It was her lover who was speaking; and the words were addressed to another. She was forgotten. She almost fainted; the very ground seemed to crumble from under her feet. . . . Ivan no longer loved her! . . . . To keep from falling, she caught at a branch, which bent with a crackling noise. This slight sound brought her to herself again; for she was afraid of being discovered now,— she wanted to hear more, to know all; she took a sort of horrible pleasure in torturing herself to the end. The crackling, which had seemed to her a formidable sound, had not even been heard on the other side of the leafy screen. But she had lost some sentences. Marca was seated once more, and the tears were falling noiselessly from her eyes, as she said:

"How should I have guessed this?"

"How indeed, dear? I took such pains to hide my love from you — from others — from myself even. I was forced to do this."

"Believe me," said Marca, doing her best to speak firmly. "You are mistaken when you think that you care for me — in that way. I have thought of you, more perhaps than you are aware. I was pleased with your great success, and remembering that you had had many hard years before attaining to that success, I often said to myself, in my great wisdom, that it was a sad pity no loving woman, who had helped you to bear the weary waiting, should now stand proudly by you, and make your triumph really beautiful. And I never thought of a mere girl, like myself, but of a true woman, grand and calm. . . . Since I have said thus much, I must go on, and tell you all my thought. Do you remember how, on that first evening when you came among us, you stood before my godmother like a man in an ecstasy? I then fancied that you had fallen suddenly and madly in love with her; I was glad, because it seemed to me that, young as she still is, she would be an ideal wife to a man of genius, whom she could appreciate and of whom she would be very proud. Was I mistaken? Tell me how, seeing her every day, you could ever have thought of me? That is what I do not understand."

There was a silence; Ivan seemed lost in thought. Olga was livid; she pressed her nails into the flesh of her hands, to conquer herself by sheer pain; she wanted to rush forward and call out to him, "Traitor!— traitor!— answer if you dare!" Then seeing that he was about to speak, she remained motionless — all her powers concentrated in the sense of hearing.

"You force me, Marca, to speak of things I would rather have passed over in silence; things which you will scarcely understand. That evening of which you speak was not the first occasion on which I had seen the Baronne de Schneefeld; it was, however, the first occasion on which I had seen her in her real sphere — at home. I had for years loved her as few women have been loved. For her misfortune, for mine too, perhaps, I was allowed to see my idol too familiarly. I have learned to know Olga — not as I had fancied her, but as she really is. I at last understand, after many revolts, after many a return to my original faith, that the ideal being who one day brought light and happiness to my dingy painting-room was not at all the same woman who lived in her Paris house, surrounded by courtiers and sycophants, with whom she played as with toys — knowing their meanness and laughing at it; doing good, perchance, as she would do evil — by caprice. She is a monstrous product of a false civilization; she has but the outward appearance of humanity. I once thought her a creature quite apart from ordinary mortals — and indeed she is a creature apart from the rest; for most of us, in spite of weaknesses and vices, have some heart — she has none. When one falls from a great height there is no escape from death. My love for this woman is quite dead. In the olden days I could never see her without falling in adoration at her feet, imploring her as one might implore a goddess. I can never see her now without a shudder of horror, of repulsion. This last feeling is as extreme as the first. I was slave to the first emotion — I cannot master the last. I think it is because I saw you by her side that I first learned to love you; the very contrast helped to open my eyes. She is a clever actress, and never forgets her part. You are simply yourself, and that suffices. She is the embodiment of lawless passion. I had but to look at you to see before my eyes the sweet and holy picture of home life; I could fancy you moving softly here and there, giving happiness to others, happy yourself, gay, young, loving, and pure. . . . Yes, dear, believe me, that which attracts men above all things is that perfect purity; it is that we worship, we revere; it is for love of that that I now say to you, Marca, try to reflect, to understand; compare the paltry feeling which Maxime calls his love with the deep feeling you have awakened in me — the respect, the adoration; try to weigh the two, my sweet one. It is not only for my own happiness that I am pleading, it is for yours also. A woman cannot love a being she despises — and you would learn to despise him. Do not turn from me. I know that all this is terribly sudden; I know, too, that I am no lover for a girl of your age — that I am ugly and awkward. But you would learn to forget these things; I would teach you, little by little, to care for me, by dint of great devotion, of greater patience. I have a whole life's tenderness to place at your feet. I have been mad, there has been idolatrous passion in my past existence; but that was not love — at least not the sort of love made of tender admiration and respect, which I feel for you."

"It is too late!" cried Marca. "Oh, pray, pray do not torture me thus! Indeed it is too late!"

"No, Marca, it is not too late. Listen to me, quietly. I have contrived everything; you have nothing to fear from Olga's anger; I have secured a safe hiding-place for you, until the day when the law permits me to claim you as my wife. After that — touch you who dare! Everything is arranged also to shield you, should you refuse to follow me. No harm shall come, through my fault, to the one I love. No one but you shall know my folly, shall guess at my despair. If, after having thought over my words, you say *No*, then I shall leave Paris; an hour after your fatal decision I shall be far away. I have already written a letter to the baronne saying that my sufferings have come back to me with such violence that I am forced to go in search of a milder climate; on my way to the station I shall throw it in a letter-box. You must say that a paroxysm shook me while I was at work — that will explain your agitation. I shall go — I know not where; and certainly Olga shall not easily find out my hiding-place. I could not see you married — I could not. . . . I say all these things to you, dear, so as to give you time to reflect — to recover your presence of mind. I have been forced to frighten you by my abrupt disclosure, so little time was left to me. But I know very well that all these precautions are useless. Say that they are useless! Come, my darling! you are not in your place here, among these false beings of a false world; you have nothing in common with them, for you are simple and good and truthful. Come! I do not frighten my darling, do I? There is a carriage waiting; as you leave this house shake the dust from your feet. You will leave behind you great wealth, and you will be ill-judged. But by your husband's side, none of their calumnies can reach you; and your husband will work for you, and give you comforts and luxuries — much love too, and infinite gratitude. Come, my darling, come!"

Marca listened — frightened, trembling, feeling her head swim, her senses reel, scarcely understanding that passionate pleading. But when she became aware that Ivan was trying to lead her gently away, she started back, and said in a suffocated way:

"I love Maxime!— I love Maxime! Do you not hear? — do you not understand? I love Maxime."

He stopped short. It was not possible; he could not have heard aright; he half smiled — a dazed, stupid smile. Then he passed his hand over his forehead and waited a few moments. It was a dreadful silence. Marca was sobbing.

"You are crying, Marca," he said gently.

"You frighten me — you break my heart!"

"You will not marry me?"

"No — No! . . . Oh, leave me!— pray leave me!"

"As you will — yes, I am going." He waited once more, very humbly. All his passionate violence had left him. He seemed a broken man.

"Farewell, Marca! farewell, my dream — my happiness." His voice trembled; Marca lifted up her child face, covered with tears.

"I am so sorry if I have hurt you! I wish I could console you!"

Ivan went up to her, and kissed her on the forehead. "It is not your fault. Good-bye, Marca!"

"Good-bye!"

He turned, and went, very slowly, very wearily. Olga saw him go; she longed to scream, but no sound would come from her parched throat. He was going, disappearing out of her life, and she had not even had the joy of vengeance; she had not been able to call out to him — to tell him that she knew him to be a traitor, that she had heard each cruel word, that she had tasted the bitter cup of humiliation to the very dregs, and that she would be avenged. She stood like a statue, quite unable to move. Was this death which was coming to her rescue? It must be a relief to feel the cold insensibility steal over one — to lie rigid and cold in the tomb, nevermore to hear cruel words, to feel one's heart pierced through and through. Die? . . . not yet — not yet; she remembered that there was something to be done first. What it was she could not yet remember. How painful is that effort to bring one's benumbed memory into life again — to call together one's ideas which are scattered far, far away! But that painful effort — she must make it. . . . There! — at last she has succeeded in raising a hand, a cold, stiff hand, to her head; the blood begins once more to circulate in the veins; the half-fainting fit has passed. Ah, memory comes back to her! She now knows what it is that remains to be done.

Marca was still crying; she was, however, doing her best to conquer her emotion; she knew that she could not remain alone much longer; she should soon be obliged to answer questions, to seem composed. She remembered all that Ivan had told her to say. She wiped her eyes, trying to be calm, when suddenly she remained motionless, her eyes dilated with fear; the leaves of a palm were held back by a white hand, and in the midst of the greenery she saw her godmother's face, which, however, she had some difficulty in recognizing. This face was horribly beautiful — the face of a sphinx, cruelly exulting over an enemy's agony. Marca understood it all. Ivan and she were victims of a carefully combined plot. She was lost; she knew that quite well.

Olga left her hiding-place. She had recovered all the elasticity of her movements. She bounded toward the girl, and Marca closed her eyes, as though she expected instantaneous death. Olga took the small wrists in her grasp with such violence that Marca screamed.

"Let me look at you! — let me guess what it was in your foolish face that fascinated him! Let me understand how it came to pass that he preferred such a doll to Olga de Schneefeld!

Speak! — speak, I tell you, that I may hear the voice he so loves!"

"There is no fault of mine in all this, Marraine," said the poor child.

"It was only yesterday, I think, that you swore no man save Maxime had courted you. You lied; but then, lies and ingratitude always go hand-in-hand."

"You yourself were witness of my astonishment. I never even guessed . . ."

"Creatures of your kind are capable of every infamy, of every dissimulation." She spoke at random, knowing but one thing — that she held the trembling girl in her power, and that in torturing her she should vent a part at least of her furious anger.

The sound of footsteps was heard: Baron Jean and his son stopped on the threshold in silent amazement. Olga, seeing them, burst into a mad fit of laughter — dreadful laughter, that seemed to have screams and sobs in it.

"Ah, yes! I had forgotten. You have come to claim the pretty bride. Your request is granted, gentlemen. Here is your future wife, Maxime. Take her; but take her as she is — a beggar; nameless, homeless, with the pretty reputation I mean to give her. I shall proclaim loudly that I surprised her just now in her lover's arms; and all Paris shall ring with the report!"

Olga threw Marca from her with such violence that the young girl almost fell at Maxime's feet.

But she rose quickly, and faced her torturer proudly.

"That is a wicked lie — so monstrous a lie that no one will believe it."

"I, for one, do not believe it."

Maxime said this with spirit. Marca uttered a joyous cry, and took refuge in his outstretched arms.

"What matters it whether it be true or false? It shall become the town talk — that I promise you. If you wish now to know the real story, I will tell it to you. Every girl about to marry requires to break some heart — her vanity would suffer otherwise; to the happiness of the accepted suitor she must oppose the despair of the rejected lover. And do you know whom she chose for this part? The only man I ever cared for — my lover, Ivan Nariskine. I picked this creature out of the street mud, brought her up, called her my daughter, made a little princess of her;— and this is her gratitude! She has snatched my one happiness from me, as a plaything to be trifled with. And she is of so poor a nature, so low, that she did not even understand the honor this great man, this noble genius, was doing her in wishing to make her his wife; she turned from him — for the sake of whom?— of a Maxime de Schneefeld — a brainless dandy! . . . Oh, you need not exclaim! This is no time for petty management of petty vanities; when one is wounded to death one has no time to think of others' feelings. And I am wounded to death. I had found that man, poor, unknown, sad, and I gave him life and happiness; my love for him was more to me than the very breath of life. I loved him so! — by his side I was a woman — I, who had never been but a statue. . . . Now all that is gone, is lost." She was speaking more to herself than to the others. Her voice faltered, getting lower and lower. She had forgotten her anger; her gestures were those of a mad woman, whose fit of fury had passed. Then, suddenly, as she raised her head, she met Marca's glance. She called out harshly:

"You still here? You must be hard of understanding! — Go! leave me — never let me see your hated doll-face again! I took you from the gutter — return to the gutter. You have asked me more than once to tell you your history. You shall be satisfied. Your mother was a poor little workwoman, who massacred her native tongue — a peasant, born of peasants. She let herself be ruined; — naturally, you creatures are inevitably destined to go wrong. I picked her up one morning, half dead. She died as you were born. . . . That is enough, I fancy, to enlighten you. Return whence you came, and never let me hear your name mentioned in my presence."

"Pardon me, aunt Olga. You gave her to me as my wife; I keep her as such. I love her."

Jean, who till then had remained quite still, now turned toward his son with a furious gesture.

"Thank you, Maxime, thank you," said Marca, seeing but him, remembering only that he loved her. "I know too well that it may never be; but you have taken me in your arms to protect and defend me — and for that I shall love you all my life. It is all over; Marca de Schneefeld has ceased to exist; in her stead there is but a poor girl, who does not even know her name. Farewell!"

She was going, never taking her eyes from him.

"Fool that you are!" cried Olga, in her hard voice; "you care for the creature — keep her; she is of the tribe to whom one need never offer a marriage ring!"

Marca turned, with a pitiful cry, and rushing toward her godmother threw at her feet all the girlish ornaments she wore — rings, ear-drops, bracelets — tearing them off with trembling fingers. She was pulling nervously at a small bracelet, when she suddenly exclaimed:

"No, I forgot — that belongs to me; my poor little mother gave it to me."

A moment later she had disappeared.

Maxime was ill at ease, and gloomy. But he did not try to retain her; nor did he follow her.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN Madame Langlois' little sitting-room, the waning light of an Autumn day fell on a peaceful group. Pierre Dubois, seated by the book-laden table, listened in silence to his teacher's gentle voice. His strong-featured face was pale and sad.

A ring of the bell interrupted the lesson. Pierre opened the door, and Madame Langlois, who from her place could see the visitor, uttered an exclamation of surprise as she recognized Marca.

The young girl, very pale, advanced slowly, with a strange timidity.

"You must know all first — before opening your arms to me. I have been sent away. I am no longer Marca de Schneefeld; I am — I do not know who I am. I do not yet quite understand it all; my head turns — turns; it is perhaps because I have walked so long; for hours, I think. I did not know where I was going; I was trying to understand. Now I am very tired — so very tired! I was resting on a bench in the Tuileries gardens; there were little children playing about me — happy little children, with a mother, and a home, and a name too. As I watched them, a sentence came to my mind; words which I had heard somewhere — I was so dazed that I could not at first remember where —'should misfortune touch you, you would come back to me, naturally.' Then I recognized the sound of your dear voice; I saw your little sitting-room, which I had filled with flowers. I have brought no flowers to-day— they are all faded and dead."

She was steadying herself by leaning on the back of a chair.

Madame Langlois took her in her arms.

"My child — my daughter!— for you are my daughter now, and you ask whether I will take you in my arms!— You dare ask it!" She kissed her over and over again, while hot tears fell on the girl's white cheeks. Marca did not cry, but she permitted herself to be caressed like a weary child.

"I have done no harm — indeed I have done no harm!" she murmured.

"Did I ask if you had? Am I not as sure of my little Marca as though indeed she were my child?"

"You are so good. . . . . But I must tell you about it; you may help me to understand. I was to marry Maxime — it was at last decided, — and he came with his father to ask my hand, when . . . how did it come to pass? Marraine had arranged it all, combined it with cunning art; she was hidden behind the plants, and she heard Mr. Nariskine, the great painter, tell me that he loved me, that I must be his wife, that Maxime was not worthy of me. . . . It seems to me it is all some story heard long ago; it does not seem real, even now. . . . I told him that I loved Maxime, and then he left me. He looked like a man who had received a great wound; he was so pale that it made me cry. Marraine loved the painter — it seems that they had loved each other for years; only his love had changed to hatred. She heard all he said of her — and she must have suffered terribly. When she sprang from her hiding-place she was like a mad woman. I thought she was going to kill me; but she only sent me from her, out upon the world, after having crushed me before Maxime's eyes. She said things which I cannot understand even now; she taunted me with my birth — my mother was a poor little peasant girl, abandoned in Paris; she called me child of the gutter, picked up by charity. She ought to have left me to die in that gutter; it would have been less cruel."

Pierre had remained a silent spectator; he was intensely interested. When she spoke of her obscure birth, something like joy glimmered in his eyes; he said, much moved:

"And your affianced lover — what did he say? what did he do?"

Marca did not seem surprised to see Pierre still there; she answered, with quiet pride:

"Maxime would believe nothing against me. He said, 'You gave her to me as my wife — I keep her as such.' I shall love him all my life for those brave words."

"Then, my child," said Madame Langlois, "he will find you out, and marry you."

"No — no, that can never be. How could he marry me? I was to have been very rich — oh, very rich, it seems; and even then his family accepted me simply because Marraine would have it so. And now — you see that it would be impossible. I have nothing. I am nothing; this is my only dower," and with a pitiful smile she showed the thin gold circlet about her wrist. "My mother left it to me; it was all she had — poor little thing! It would scarcely be enough. Maxime needs a great deal of money — he himself told me so;" and she let her head fall wearily once more on her friend's shoulder.

Pierre was about to speak again; but at a sign from Madame Langlois, he quietly withdrew.

"You are tired out, my child; let your mother put you to bed. Let me care for you — pet you; let me understand that I am no longer alone in the world."

Marca wound her arms about Madame Langlois' neck.

"You are really not angry with me? I shall be the cause of so much trouble to you."

"And of so much happiness, my darling!"

Marca was too entirely worn out, body and mind, to understand what was going on. She vaguely wondered whether the little room where she was being undressed was not the only bedroom, whether the narrow bed where she was being tucked in was not the only bed, of the small establishment. But the idea only floated through her mind; all her notions of things and places were confused; she had suffered too deeply, she was too thoroughly exhausted, to reason about anything. The physical comfort, the gradual falling asleep in a good bed, seemed to her the one supreme happiness; her only fear was to be obliged to think and to remember. The imperious selfishness of unaccustomed suffering kept her quiet; and even while her new mother's lips still lingered on her forehead, she was forgetting all her woes in sleep.

Madame Langlois, seated by the bed, began to reflect deeply; and her meditations were by no means gay. She was asking herself by dint of what personal sacrifices she could manage to shield this child from want; she was reproaching herself for not having forced her, during her school days, to work, so as to have in her own hand some means of earning her daily bread. But then, who could ever have foretold so dreadful a catastrophe?

She rose softly, and went to her writing-desk to count the small sum that remained of her quarter's allowance; it was a mere pittance. Her health, declining day by day, required much care, costly care. And after her death, there would be nothing.

She spent a part of the night examining her small possessions, so as to put aside what might yet be sold; the small lodging must now be organized for two instead of one. At last, worn out, she wrapped herself in a shawl, and threw herself on the sofa to rest.

It was there that Marca, in the early morning, found her. She was alarmed, seeing her so pale and rigid; but the labored breathing reassured her. Then, full of remorse and confusion, she awaited the awakening of her new mother.

"How pleasant to see a dear young face near me — to think that I shall never be alone again!" Madame Langlois smiled, as though she were receiving a favor instead of conferring one.

"And I stole your bed — your rest! How could you let me be so selfish?"

"You so needed rest, poor dear!"

Then, hand in hand, they talked long and earnestly about the future, and Marca tried to appear very brave; she would forget all her brilliant past life, she would work and earn money— plenty of money, so as to surround her dear mamma with comfort.

Madame Langlois encouraged her, petted her; pretended not to see the tears that came unbidden into the girl's eyes; wondering all the while how this white-handed princess could manage to earn even enough to keep soul and body together. Each small detail of her dainty toilette spoke of luxury grown to be a habit — a habit so easy to acquire, so difficult to lose.

"Ah!" sighed the good lady, "if you only had your diploma! In France we can do nothing without that scrap of paper, my poor child."

"But I shall present myself at the very first occasion, and obtain it. I mean to work so hard!"

As she spoke she looked around the poor little sitting-room, so visibly poor, and added quickly:

"But even before obtaining this famous diploma I must try to earn a few pennies — how, I do not know; but I cannot continue to take my dear mamma's bed, and snatch the bread from her mouth." She tried to speak lightly, but her lips quivered.

Madame Langlois remained silent, her thoughts busy with the past.

"To think," she at last exclaimed, "that a few years ago I might indeed have received you as my daughter, shielded you from all care and all want — and that now I can only give you a poor shelter and a great deal of useless tenderness! There are certain sacrifices one ought not to make. How hard it is, sometimes, to know what one's duty really is!"

Marca was alarmed at the working of her face, at the trembling of her thin hands. She did her best to quiet her.

"Listen, Marca; you must know me for what I am — or, rather, you must know what troubles have come to me — before you take the habit of calling me *mother*. It will do me good to open my heart — I have been silent so long! You will then see, my darling, that there are sadder stories than yours. . . I had been married three years when my husband, for an odious crime, was sent to New Caledonia, as a convict. Such things happen,— one hears of them, without believing much in the possibility of such horrors, until they come to oneself. The convict's wife remains his wife, and is sullied by his infamy. I did what I could; I took back my maiden name, and sought to earn my living. I could not let myself die of despair, for I had a child. I gave lessons, and at last found myself at the head of a school. My pupils were principally foreigners; I was glad of this, as they would be less liable than French girls to learn that I was a convict's wife. Little by little I lost sight of all my old acquaintances, of all those who could remind me of the past. Meanwhile, my son was growing up; I could not keep him with me, in the midst of the little girls. A distant relative of mine, who felt some interest in me, especially since it was evident that I needed no one's help, offered to take the boy and see that he received the best possible education. I accepted — I could not do otherwise; was I not working for him? But my wisdom was folly; I ought to have given up my school, to have condemned my son and myself to abject poverty, rather than to have allowed him to leave me; my one duty was to struggle against the fatal inheritance of his father's nature. Each day he grew more like that father; he had his charm of manner, his light and pleasant laugh, his love of pleasure, his weakness, his cowardice. Still years went on, and he gave no serious cause of uneasiness. He was almost a man. His studies had not been very brilliant, but he seemed to have some business capacity. He asked to be put in a broker's office; and in spite of my objections, strongly expressed, his desire was granted. I wished to have him near me; the little fortune I had earned by dint of hard work would suffice for my son and myself; I was beginning to feel the first symptoms of the disease which is killing me, and I wanted rest; we were to live together — it was my one dream of happiness. Just eight months ago — soon after you left me — I was told that my son had forged his patron's signature; the theft amounted to two hundred thousand francs; if I consented to pay that sum, the crime would remain unpunished. I had, during twenty years, put aside just two hundred thousand francs. I asked for twenty-four hours;— at the end of that time the broker was paid. With the sale of my furniture, and the little money remaining to me, I bought a small annuity — just enough to keep me from starving; naturally, it dies with me. And now that another child has come to me, in the place of my lost son, whom I shall never see more, I can do nothing for her! Life is indeed hard — and one's duty often seems difficult to decide."

"Dear mamma, you were right to do what you did, and your other child will try to comfort and console you instead of being a new cause of sorrow and anxiety!" Soon, by way of proving that she meant to be a useful member of society, Marca went to work, sweeping and dusting, putting things to rights, and preparing the morning's coffee. She did her best, but she was so entirely inexperienced, and made so many blunders — perhaps a little on purpose, so as to take Madame Langlois' attention away from her own sorrows — that the two women, who certainly had no reason to be very gay, laughed more than once.

It was decided that Marca should occupy the little sitting-room. A camp bed must be bought, and evidently the sofa became a useless luxury; that must be sold, and a few other articles, voted equally useless, must be sacrificed. There were some inevitable purchases to be made for Marca; she had escaped from the baronne's home barely taking time to snatch a hat and cloak, and thus had nothing to sell.

At twelve Pierre entered. He looked as though he had not slept, and was more awkward than ever, fearing to appear indiscreet. But the warm welcome of the two ladies reassured him. It was he who attended to the necessary changes in the small apartment; who bought and sold and put things in order, working with a will. Marca, well-veiled, went out to the nearest shop to buy some linen, and enough black stuff to make a dress, her pretty costume being considered, in spite of its simplicity, much too elegant for every-day wear.

CHAPTER XVII.

A FEW days later, Pierre determined, after many hesitations, to make an appeal to Madame de Schneefeld. It seemed to him that she must already repent of this odious act of hers; that she could not in cold blood thus abandon a young girl who had been looked upon as her daughter. He was moved to this resolution by Marca's pitiful white face. He saw the tears which, in spite of her efforts, welled up to her eyes; he guessed how painful were her faint attempts at cheerfulness; he watched the ill repressed revolts, the instinctive shrinking from the hideousness of poverty. She should know nothing of his attempt, and thus her dignity would be spared. He would be eloquent; he would show this woman that her conduct was so wicked that the world, in spite of its indulgence toward the rich, would end by blaming her;— he would be sure to move her. Pierre still had many of the illusions of youth.

The house seemed, to the workman, terribly imposing, with its carved front, its grand carriage-sweep before the door, its glittering conservatories, and the luxurious quiet of the beautiful park, which seemed to be its own garden. He fancied Marca in the midst of this magnificence, at home, and quietly enjoying wealth, as though indeed she had been born to it. Then, by way of contrast, he remembered her as he had seen her an hour before, doing her best to cut out a dress in the skimp black material she had bought, handling the coarse stuff with shrinking fingers. She seemed to be making the mourning garments for her dead happiness. This thought revived Pierre's sinking courage.

He rang, and a tall footman opened the door, surveying the young man with a comprehensive look of disdain. Madame la Baronne had left Paris some days before, leaving no address, merely ordering letters to be forwarded to St. Petersburg.

Pierre turned away, scarely knowing which was the stronger feeling — pity for Marca, or joy to think that she now belonged to them —to Madame Langlois and himself.

When one throws a stone into sleeping water, there is a great splash and glitter of scattered drops — then all is quiet again ; great circles ripple the face of the water, then grow smaller and fainter, till all is still once more,— and none would guess that, deep below, lies a great stone.

So it was with the terrible catastrophe of Marca's life. Now the shock was past, and day succeeded day, monotonously uneventful. At first it seemed impossible that something should not happen to snatch her away from a life for which she was so little fitted. She would start at the sound of every footfall; a ring at the bell would make her tremble and grow faint. She could not believe that she was quite forgotten. Certainly Baron Jean and his wife would be only too glad to be well rid of her; but there was her little friend Claire — and even Laure could not be entirely indifferent to her fate. . . . And then Maxime: of course she could never be his wife — no one understood that more clearly than she did; still, if not as lover, at least as cousin, as friend, he might seek her out and help her. . . . Perhaps they had made him believe some dreadful stories, and he had grown to despise her.

She thought of him all the time. She could not get his image out of her mind. Indeed, she made no great effort to think of anything else. She had not meant to do wrong; and without this one consolation it seemed to her that she should go mad, in the weary life of petty privations which now was hers. Sometimes in the quiet of the night, when she thought Madame Langlois was sleeping, she would repeat Maxime's name, softly; then the sobs would come — the bitter, convulsive sobs which she did her best to choke down by burying her face in the pillow. She so passionately longed for a little happiness ! — it seemed her right; and she rebelled and fought against her destiny. There were moments when she felt herself grow wicked and hard, unable to pray for strength and patience. And Madame Langlois would hear the sobs without daring to console her adopted child, knowing that the only hope of a cure was in time and silence. Marca shrank from alluding to Maxime. His name was never mentioned; and Madame Langlois knew that it was better so.

As the days passed by, Madame Langlois saw with terror her small monthly allowance slip away, and she understood it was impossible for two people to live upon what barely sufficed for one. Marca did her very best; she had insisted on having the charwoman dismissed, and bravely did all the work herself. But her inexperience was costly, and it became evident that there must be a change, or poverty would soon become absolute want.

One day Marca found Madame Langlois reading a letter. By her side was an account-book, and near the book a tiny pile of silver.

"Come here, my child; I have been worrying my brain to discover the means of forcing two and two to make six; but I give it up. We have been living like rich people — you need not smile, my dear — and, unfortunately, we are not rich. So I have, after much trouble, found a little work for my daughter; she will now be able to earn enough — to force two and two to make six!"

"I am so glad, dear mamma, so glad!"

"I have lost sight of nearly all my old acquaintances. But I had a favorite pupil, a foreigner, many years older than you, dear, who married a Frenchman. She has never quite forgotten me; and I wrote to her that she might find you such work as a girl, even before her examinations, can accept. She is kind-hearted, and has found you just the right place; you are to give two hours every morning, and help some little girls to learn their lessons. They are the children of a certain Comtesse de Vignon.'

"Oh, no — no — not that! I cannot, mamma, indeed I cannot go to that house!"

Yet, some hours later, after having talked the matter over with Madame Langlois, when she finally understood that a like opportunity might not again be found, when she had counted the pitifully small sum which still remained for household wants and convinced herself that she must either accept at once or see the generous friend who had become a mother to her suffer from hunger,— then, with a white face and set lips, she determined to accept. It was the end of all things — the final turning away from her past. She would take Madame de Vignon's money so as not to starve; it would be a first step on the dreary road which now stretched dismally before her. She saw herself as she would doubtless be some day, a poor old maid, in a scanty black dress, slaving so as to be able to sleep in a bed at night and not starve by day; joyless, hopeless, with a dull, blank future.

The next morning Marca went to Madame de Vignon's house. She nearly fainted as she entered, so that she only half heard the torrent of words poured upon her. She only knew that the expressions of compassion were mingled with many questions,— for the countess was curious, and her curiosity did not seem devoid of a certain underlying satisfaction.

"It is strange! — ah, my dear, life is much more extraordinary than fiction. . . . I am not to mention you? Rely on my discretion. I understand how painful; — besides, now the affair is half forgotten; the great subject of interest is Laure's marriage. The Baronne Olga's sudden departure was a shock, to be sure; but then, as she left the money it did not matter so much. At first, of course, you were very much talked about; people said all sorts of things — I never believed the worst stories, otherwise I should not trust you to teach my little girls, should I now? After all, you know you were not of the family! . . . So it is all understood; you are to come every morning from nine to eleven — you are sure to meet no one at that time. Maxime comes to see me — but only on my day; I could not receive him otherwise, for, between ourselves, he has a detestable reputation, — I might be compromised. They say he has taken a small house in some out-of-the-way quarter, and that he is to make of it a very nest of oriental luxury. Do you know what people say? — that Olga gives him any amount of money to make him go to the devil faster than he otherwise would; — he seems greatly to enjoy the journey. Olga is odd, very odd you know? . . . Dear! dear! I had such a turn when the little vicomtesse recommended you as governess for my children. I gave such a scream!

After all, it is a pleasure to do a little good in this world; — besides, we both agreed that a girl who has not passed her examinations could not expect to be paid like a regular teacher. I seem to be rich, but I am not. I am often terribly distressed for money. . . . It is settled, is it not? I shall expect you to-morrow at nine!" Then, before Marca had reached the door, she called out: "By the way, Marca; you had better always come up the back staircase — you do not mind? It is out of kindness to you, for naturally you would not care to be seen by your old acquaintances."

Marça had never expected to suffer quite so bitterly. Maxime had forgotten her. Maxime thought but of himself and his low pleasures. She was as though she had never been.

"Is it arranged, dear?"

"Yes; I am to begin to-morrow."

Madame Langlois did not dare say more; she had never yet seen that hard look on the girl's face. Marca remained a long time standing by the window, half unconsciously looking at the workmen, who filled the court with their noise. They were working at the tiny house whose garden she could see from the window; the many children of the court seemed greatly to enjoy the bustle, and added to the noise.

At last Marca turned around, and saw her adopted mother's pained look; she threw herself down by the good lady's side, and sobbed away all her bitter and rebellious thoughts.

"You must love me a little more still, dear mamma, for I have but you in this world. He has forgotten me. I would not believe it at first; each day I expected to see him. But I shall never see him more. Ah! he never could have loved me!"

Time went on, heavily and sadly; but yet the days wore away into long, monotonous weeks. Winter cold had come, though it was yet but November. Every morning Marca went to give her lesson. She did her very best, but it was hard work; the children were terribly spoiled, and treated the governess with haughty condescension; little Zeé alone still adored her.

Marca rarely saw Madame de Vignon, as that lady was not an early riser. So this life, which had seemed monstrous and impossible, turned out to be quite simple. She was the governess; no one seemed to remember that she had ever been anything else. Madame de Vignon made her understand that she could not keep a name to which she had no right whatever. So she was called Marie Marca; it was rather an odd name, said the lady, but it would do; she had been christened Marie — and after all, there are so many queer names in the world! She was paid every week, and though the sum was ridiculously small, it helped the two women to live. Every afternoon Marca worked with her teacher, and hoped to present herself at the next public examination. With a regular diploma she would be able to obtain a little remunerative work. But she was growing pale, and she had lost all her vivacity. She now suffered more from the change in her destiny than she had done at first. She lived in her past — so much so that she did not notice how, each day, her kind protector lost her strength.

One morning Marca did not find her pupils in the school-room. Madame de Vignon had taken them to a grand marriage at the other end of Paris. Marca, not knowing whether she ought to remain or not, was questioning a servant, when M. de Vignon passed by. This was the first time she had seen the master of the house since she had become his children's teacher.

"How? — my wife did not let you know? — She let you come for nothing!"

Marca was shivering under her thin cloak; the weather was dreadful, and there was no fire in the school-room. The count forced her to warm herself at the drawing-room fire.

"Heartless! — quite heartless!" he muttered, as he brought a cushion for her feet and stirred the fire. "To make you walk through the sleet and dirt! Ah, if I could do something for you! But I can't, I can't!"

He was examining the girl through his eye-glass, as she sat motionless and silent. She glanced about her, taking in the luxury of the place, thinking of the far greater luxury which had been hers, remembering her passion for beautiful objects. The faithlessness of her lover had been her great sorrow; but small sorrows of another kind now gathered about it.

M. de Vignon, silent also, followed these thoughts on the girl's tell-tale face, and longed greatly to console her; but he did not know how to begin. At last he said:

"A terrible change, poor child; — a terrible change."

"Why did they not let me die with my poor little mother?" muttered the unhappy girl.

"Who was she — your little mother?"

"I do not know. When Madame de Schneefeld taunted me with my birth, she was in no humor to go into details, nor I to ask for any. My mother belonged to the lower classes, and was only sixteen years of age; — I know no more."

"And your father?"

Marca glanced at him, then flushed.

"Foundlings have no father, have they? Misfortune teaches one many things; — the poor little workwoman did not know, very likely, the real name of the man who made her love him."

M. de Vignon seemed ill at ease. He walked up and down, and finally left the drawing-room, to return immediately.

"Will you let me be — what I once asked you to consider me — your friend? Let me try and discover your origin; give me all possible clues."

"It would be of no use; I can give you no further details."

She was nervously playing with the gold circlet on her wrist — a trick of hers — and he was watching her intently.

"I understood — Maxime told me — that you threw all your trinkets at Olga's feet. Very plucky of you — but that bracelet there?"

Marca did not want to hear anything more about Maxime, so she said hastily:

"It was my mother's; it was all she had. . . . But I must go; Madame de Vignon would never forgive a *tête-à-tête* with you. Farewell."

"That bracelet might be some proof; there may be something written inside; let me have it!" and he tried to unfasten the bracelet.

Marca was a little impatient, and quickly snatched away her hand.

"Why, there are millions of such bracelets; they even have a name, now-a-days — *porte-bonheur* — what an irony, is it not? Take my advice, Count, and do not say that I warmed my feet at your fireside. I thank you all the same!" And without listening to further supplications she ran away.

As she took off her cloak she saw that there was something white in the outside pocket. It was a letter, bearing her name hastily written; the envelope contained a five hundred franc bill, and these words scribbled on a scrap of paper:

"Let me care for you, let me persuade you that my sincere affection for you gives me some right to protect and aid you. Unfortunately I can do but little; but I shall perhaps be able to secure some work less meanly compensated than your teaching here — my wife is so very economical. For Heaven's sake, Marca, do not mistake my intentions. I have done but little good in this world, and some harm; let me at least atone for the past in being of some little use to you. Remember the day when I spoke to you of my dead child."

"You must send that back at once, dear," said Madame Langlois, when she had heard the whole story. "Did you not tell me that Madame de Vignon had more than once shown some jealousy at her husband's evident liking for you? I sincerely believe that Monsieur de Vignon is this time perfectly sincere and honest; but his reputation is not a good one — and you know, my child, that in our position pride must become a virtue as it is a necessity."

Marca folded up the bill, with a note of polite but rather cold refusal; she determined to carry it herself before evening.

It was the countess's day. Marca did not know this, or she would not have waited till the afternoon to do her errand. She pulled her thick veil well over her face, and her heart beat violently: what if she were to meet some old acquaintances! Two or three carriages waited before the door, but she saw no familiar faces. She was grateful that Madame de Vignon had thought fit to condemn her always to take the back staircase.

She thought the servant to whom she handed the letter, with the recommendation to give it into the count's own hands, smiled somewhat scornfully; but she hurried away, and thought no more of the matter.

"Marca!"

The young girl, who was hastening away, stopped, and was forced to lean against the wall to keep from falling. Maxime was by her side.

"What do you wish? Let me pass. I have forgotten you, as you have forgotten me. I am no longer of your world."

"I have not forgotten you! I love you, my darling; I have been looking for you all over Paris. Where do you live?—how do you live?"

"I live with some one who is a mother to me, and who will not abandon me as others have done. I earn my daily bread. I need no one. You looked for me? I do not believe it. You love me still? I do not believe it. I am told that you are not inconsolable — that your life is a life of dissipation."

"Calumnies — mere calumnies. Let me walk with you; we shall be able to talk more freely than here."

Marca saw, as she lifted her head, that several persons were coming down the grand staircase, talking with animation, and stopping almost at every step; she saw also that Maxime was ill at ease.

"You do not wish to be seen with the children's governess!" She said this with bitter violence; and before he could detain her she had rushed away.

Maxime thought he had never seen her look so pretty; her indignation was becoming. He now would be sure to find her out. Madame de Vignon, who had never told him that Marca came each day to her house, could not now refuse to tell him where she lived. It was a great relief to know that she was in good hands, and that she bravely accepted her new position. He would find means of sending her money from time to time in such a way that she should never guess where it came from. After all, it was not his fault if Olga had sent her away!

Marca told her adventure to Madame Langlois. Then, after a long silence, she suddenly exclaimed:

"Do you know, dear mamma, that I am eighteen to-day? What a birthday!"

The tears fell thick and fast. Her eighteenth birthday, that was to have been so gay, and was so very, very sad!

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN the morning, Marca received a letter from Madame de Vignon, informing her that her services were no longer required, and enclosing the small sum due to her. "You are really very unsophisticated, my dear," she wrote, "if you fancy that the count receives his letters without control. If ever you have a gay Lothario as husband, you will do as I do: watch and detect. I am not angry with you — though certainly your past conduct alone is accountable for what has happened; you are by instinct a flirt. But though I forgive you, you must understand that I cannot receive under my roof a person so dangerous to my domestic happiness."

"Her domestic happiness!" Marca almost laughed; but she did not even finish reading the letter, which was a long one; she tossed it into a drawer.

This peremptory dismissal did not affect her; she had other cares, and a sorrow so great that petty annoyances could not touch her. During the night Madame Langlois had been taken so ill that Marca, frightened at the violence of the attack, had called to Pierre for help.

Then, as she watched this poor face, drawn with pain, Marca forgot all else. She bitterly reproached herself for the selfishness of her past sorrow. She soothed and petted her adopted mother with as much tenderness as though indeed she had been her daughter. She had to make up for many hours of silent brooding and cold undemonstrativeness.

"My God!" the poor woman would murmur, as she watched Marca; "I cannot leave her! God have mercy on us both! What will become of her, alone in this cruel world?" Then Pierre, who watched by the bed-side, would press her hand, and in his honest eyes she read that the young girl should never be unprotected or uncared for. But the dying woman did not dare take comfort in this; for she knew that Pierre loved Marca — and that Marca could never return that love.

Death came to her suddenly, after all. She seemed much easier one evening; and Pierre, as he left the room, begged Marca to take some rest. Madame Langlois, half dozing, added her entreaties; she needed nothing; the suffering had left her.

The next morning when Marca woke she saw that Madame Langlois was quite rigid and cold. Death had come to her gently during her sleep.

Pierre took all the painful details of the funeral upon himself, and let Marca sob away her grief. She wept over her loss, she wept also over her utter desolateness. She was alone in the world — really alone now, penniless and homeless; and the question of her daily bread became a question of terrible import.

Pierre was the only other mourner at the poor funeral. The two young people followed the hearse, while a cold winter rain fell silently, adding its chill to their misery. Marca noticed that the tomb was a very decent one, and that a marble-cutter came for some instructions about the cross he was to make.

"But all that must cost dreadfully—and there is so little money left!" whispered Marca.

"It is all settled; I have done for her what I should have done for my own mother." He did not add that his last penny had been spent in thus honoring the dear woman's memory.

Marca spent a horrible night in the small apartment, now empty and forlorn, with the influence of death hovering about it. She tried to reason herself into something like composure; but her nerves were so irritated and quivering that more than once during the sleepless hours she came near calling out.

When Pierre knocked at her door in the morning, she rushed toward him and said feverishly:

"I cannot stay here—indeed I cannot; I shall die of fright. Take me away, Pierre,—take me away!"

He tried to soothe her, speaking as he might have done to a frightened child, trying to seem very old and dignified. He gave her to understand that she ought to leave—not because of vague terrors, but because so large an apartment (Marca could not help smiling) was far too expensive and fine for a single person. He had thought of everything — that good Pierre; he had already spoken to the portress — a just-minded woman, and kind, too, when she had to do with people who paid their rent on the very day when it came due — and this worthy person knew of some one who was willing to take the apartment off Marca's hands, and even to buy what furniture she did not need. As to the girl, she might have, just above, a pretty room, quite clean and fresh, and very cheap.

"How good you are!" said Marca, as she listened to all this, which Pierre told in many words, and with plenty of details, so as to give her time to recover herself. "You take care of me as though I were your sister — but we are somewhat brother and sister, are we not, since our dear Madame Langlois was a mother to us both? I am very fond of you, my dear brother Pierre," and smiling, she put her hand in his. She noticed that he turned pale, and that there was a nervous twitch about the corners of his mouth. But he was quickly master of himself again, and answered:

"Your brother would give his life for you, dear Marca. But unfortunately a man's life could not be of much use to you now; a few bank notes would be much more to the purpose — and those I do not possess."

Pierre needed hard work, and immediately began to carry what furniture Marca deemed indispensable to the floor above. It was he who arranged the whole affair with the *concierge;* and soon the young girl found herself in the "pretty room," which was now her only home. It was but an attic, and very small. Pierre watched the expression of the pale young face, and in the midst of the animated talk he thought fit to keep up he guessed her instinctive shrinking from this poor, mean refuge, this apparent poverty; he remembered that her room in Madame de Schneefeld's princely house must have been a marvel of dainty and fresh beauty, all pink silk and white lace — he thought it must have been something of the sort,— and his rapid and incoherent talk came to an untimely end. He saw that she was not listening, that she had even forgotten his presence. When he had finished his work, he quietly retired, making no sign. If she suffered, he also suffered, and very cruelly.

Marca remained standing by the window, trying hard, in the midst of her misery, to think seriously. Now that she was alone, she confessed to herself that the future stretched before her in darkness, without one gleam of hope. She knew that it is often difficult for women, for young girls, even when they are highly recommended and in every way prepared for the struggle, to make a place for themselves among the workers; and she, whose past life had been one of luxury, who had asked of the future only happiness and joy,— what could she do, now that her only friend and protector was a workman? Poor Pierre! she must keep a brave face before him, and seem hopeful, for she could accept nothing further from him; she guessed too well that his purse was now quite empty.

While doing her best to put some order in her thoughts, she had been mechanically following the stir and bustle in the court below. The tiny house, which was bright and clean, had been all day filled with workmen. Furniture had been brought by the wagon-load. Now everything seemed to be about finished. She had not been the only one to move that day; but taking possession of her attic had scarcely required an hour's work, and Pierre's good-will — whereas the moving-in down-stairs had lasted all day long.

Just then, as the last upholsterer was leaving the place, a gentleman — the happy possessor of this pretty place, no doubt — entered the court, and looked about him. As he carelessly lifted his eyes, she uttered a faint cry and started back. She had recognized Maxime.

That was the greatest blow of all. What could she do now? Seek a new refuge? That would be impossible — her absolute poverty forbade anything of the sort. Live thus close to him — run the risk of meeting him? — that would be dreadful; and even as she said that it would be dreadful, a wild thrill of joy shook her from head to foot. Then she grew afraid. She loved him still; she had hoped to forget him, but it had been a vain hope. He was to her the incarnation of her past happiness; and all her proud resolutions, all her contempt for the man who had abandoned her in her distress, all was forgotten, save that he had once said "I love you." The sweetness of these words was making her wild. She called out — "Maxime! Maxime!"— as though the faint cry could reach him, as though his glance could rest on an attic window! She sobbed bitterly; she wanted to see him, to hear him, to call out to him —"I love you, Maxime! I love you still!"

Then came the inevitable reaction, and with it a great terror.

As she had said to M. de Vignon, poverty teaches one many things. There could be for her no safety save in flight. She must not see Maxime; he must not guess her presence.

Suddenly she remembered her American friend — the girl who had left school a year before she herself had been called away by Olga. At first the two girls had kept up a lively correspondence, then gradually the letters had ceased. Marca did not remember her friend's exact address, but the father was well-known in the city where he lived, and a letter would doubtless reach her. Marca spent all that evening writing to her school-mate, telling all her pitiful story, and entreating her friend to let her join her in America, where she might be able to earn her living — to teach; — they would not require her to produce that diploma, which now she had no hope of obtaining. In a new country, far from tormenting memories, she would learn to forget Maxime. She had faith in the American girl's generosity; she was rich, she would send her money for the journey, and then — all would be over, well over, between Maxime and herself. She tried to feel glad as she said this; yet the tears fell once more, and the passionate sobs were hushed by sleep only as the early dawn peeped in at the attic window.

The following day, when Pierre knocked at her door, he seemed very bright and happy.

"I must tell you of my good luck," he said; "I am so happy, so proud! I slipped an article, which naturally I signed with a fictitious name, into the journal's letter-box — and this morning it appeared in print. I am so pleased! Soon I shall become a real journalist — such things have been. I shall owe my good fortune to our dear Madame Langlois; and I should be so proud to pay my debt of gratitude to her adopted daughter!"

"You are good, Pierre; and I thank you very heartily. I am happy at your deserved good fortune. But I hope soon to relieve you of your burden. I have taken a serious resolution. I have written to a friend of mine, an American, asking her to find me some work on her side of the world; here it is too difficult."

Pierre looked at her in dumb amazement and incredulity. It was not possible; did she not know that it was for her that he was ambitious, for her sake that he hoped to change the workman's vest for gentlemen's attire?

"It cannot be — it is not possible!" he said at last.

She signed to him to stand by her at the window, and pointed toward the dainty house.

"It is Maxime who occupies that little place; I saw him take possession of it after you left me. I understood then that I still loved him — more than ever, perhaps; and for that reason I must go."

Pierre felt a fierce anger arise within him. Marca would never see in him more than a mere workman. All the hatred of his class against the rich boiled within him; he would have liked to try his strength against that of this white-handed, worthless profligate, whom Marca preferred to him; to shake the beauty out of him; to throw him disfigured and helpless at her feet, and then cry out: "Love him now if you will!" He said nothing, but the young girl half guessed his thoughts, and grew troubled. She called out:

"Do not be angry, Pierre — my brother! I have struggled, and all in vain!"

"What can there be in him to make you love him, after his cowardly desertion? Shall I tell you? He has a good tailor, and his useless hands are white and dainty; that is why you love him. I am but a worker — a rough, low fellow. Even if I succeed, by dint of energy and talent, in scrambling into a place where you might deign to notice me, you will never forget that you saw me first in common clothes and with rough hands. And to think that I have worked, and hoped, and been ambitious, simply for your sake,— so as to be able to say one day, 'Be my wife; I love you with all the strength of my manhood; I have loved you ever since that day when you appeared before me like the incarnation of spring, with your hands full of flowers.' But all that is useless; you need not tell me so, I know it! I was mad enough to feel some hope, when I learned that you also, by your birth, belonged to the people — when the rich cast you off — when I, a workman, was able to care for you and cherish you!"

She did not answer; she only looked at him with sorrowful eyes, in which he thought he saw a little fear also.

That made him gentle and quiet at once; he stopped before her very humbly, trying to soften his voice so as not to frighten her.

"You will never learn to love me?" He could not quite give up all hope.

"One cannot love two men at the same time, Pierre. You are my dear, dear brother; but you can never be more to me. It is not possible." Then seeing that his passion was again growing violent, she added pitifully: "Oh, why do you make me lose my last, my only friend? Do you not understand that after what you have said, I must no longer see you, speak to you, as I have done till now? Indeed, I did not need to have this last cross laid on my shoulders!"

"Yes," he said slowly, "it is quite true.

Through my fault I have deprived you of a friend, and taken all happiness out of my own life. I am naturally violent; and to be good one needs a little hope. There is no hope left for me — so I must go away from you; I must say 'Good-bye,' Marca."

"Good-bye, Pierre;" and she remembered that once before an honest man had left her saying, "Good-bye, Marca;" and she had never seen him more. Was Maxime worthy that she should sacrifice to the mad love he had inspired two such men as the painter Nariskine and the workman Pierre?

"But what will become of you?"

"I still have a little money left; and surely in the large shops I shall be able to find some sewing to do — enough to keep me alive until I get news from America. I have calculated that I may have no answer before three or four weeks."

"It is quite decided, then?"

"Quite — my poor, dear friend."

"And when, by accident, we meet on the stairs, I may speak to you — may I not?"

"Oh, Pierre, Pierre! why did you let me know that you loved me? We were so happy as brother and sister!" She gave him her hand, and he kissed it. Then, in silence, he left her.

CHAPTER XIX.

AND now came the terrible question of her daily bread. She must manage to earn a little money to enable her to live until the letter from America should relieve her of further care. She could not hope to earn that money as teacher; she had no recommendations now which might make up for the want of regular certificates. But she spoke several languages — English as easily almost as French; she could also make herself understood in German and Italian.

One morning, trying to feel very brave, she started for the *Magasin du Louvre*, meaning to offer her services; she could surely learn quickly to be a passable shop-girl, and there were always so many strangers in Paris that her talent as linguist might not be despised.

What if she should meet Laure, making her last purchases before the marriage? . . . But it was early, and she saw no familiar faces at all. She was terribly frightened; she blundered through the little speech, learned beforehand, and this did not favorably prepossess the solemn, white-cravatted *surveillant*, who listened to her. He made out, however, that she had not the slightest experience, and that she had no recommendations.

"If you knew, Mademoiselle, how many applications of this kind we receive daily, you would understand that in the number we choose rather experienced persons than novices; and persons with good references rather than those who come to us without."

"Ah," said the poor child, lifting her tear-filled eyes toward the speaker, "no one would show greater zeal than I! I so long to earn my livelihood — and so need to do so! I bring no references, because I was a great lady's adopted daughter, and one day, in a fit of anger, she threw me into the street. You do not believe my story — I see that in your eyes; and I do not wonder, for it does not sound real;— and yet I assure you it is true, terribly true!"

She was listened to very politely, but very coldly. It was possible that, as the city was full of strangers just then, she might be engaged as supplementary interpreter;— an English clerk was even summoned, who deigned to approve of her accent, and her address was written down in a large book. But she left the immense shop with a sinking of the heart; she guessed that she should hear no more of the possible place,— in which she was not mistaken.

She was bitterly sad and absolutely discouraged. The weather was cold; half-melted snow rendered the streets hideously dirty; Marca shivered under her thin cloak, and the worn boots scarcely protected her feet from the slush. The sky was low and grey, and blackish clouds were chased wildly here and there by an icy wind. When she was little, she fancied that God could only see the earth through a clear blue sky, and that clouds formed an impenetrable veil; she remembered her childish fancy as she walked. Perhaps if she prayed very hard the prayer might pierce the clouds; and so, jostled by the hurrying crowd, she prayed as she had not done for many a day. Yet, even as the words gushed from her heart, she knew that this was not a real prayer — that it was a cry of passion, a great longing for happiness, a mad calling to Maxime; there was no resignation in her prayer: she was so young — she so needed a little sunshine!

As she passed the Madeleine she went into the big church; it was almost empty just then, and she shrank into the corner of a side chapel.

She remained there a long time, quite motionless. A priest, not far off, was saying mass, and the tinkling of the silver bell reached her softly. She did not think, however, of approaching and following the service; she did not wish to stir. She was no longer cold; a sort of numbness had come over her. Yet she noticed, in a dreamy way, that there was a subdued bustle in the church. There was doubtless going to be some fine marriage, for the *suisses* wore their grandest accoutrements, gold-laced hats, scarlet and gold uniform, white silk stockings. The big armchairs were placed in front of the great altar, where the white marble angels would look down on the happy bride. Still Marca remained motionless, trying to pray. She did not look up when the rustle of silk told her that the body of the church was gradually filling with a finely-clad crowd. She remembered that the end of the year was close at hand, and that she herself was to have been married in December. This caused her to cry a little, but very quietly, very discreetly, lest she should be noticed.

Suddenly the organist struck up a triumphant march; the church vibrated with the magnificent rolling sounds. Marca had always loved music, especially music in a large church, with its grand vibrations. She lifted her head, half consoled by the pleasure she felt. The march was the signal of the bridal party's entrance. The church was nearly full of well-dressed people; it was a harmonious mixture of rich winter colors and stuffs — velvet, plush, furs, with a preponderance of deep reds and blue-blacks; it gave one a soothing impression of warmth and wealth. There was the rustling sound of a rising crowd; then a silence, full of curious expectation. The two *suisses*, staff in hand, walked in front; then came the bride, seeming very tall under her veil, with the long satin train, covered with lace and orange blossoms. She leaned on her father's arm, and her father was — Baron Jean de Schneefeld! Marca rose, much frightened, and cast a glance on the crowd which hemmed her in. She wanted to fly; but she could not. Close to the chapel where she was half hidden she saw Madame de Vignon and her little girls. If she made the slightest stir she would be recognized. She once more hid her face, trembling from head to foot.

And thus it was that she assisted, uninvited, at her cousin's wedding. She was indeed to have taken part in this ceremony; but instead of being, as she ought to have been, dressed like Laure in creamy satin, with lace and white flowers, she shivered under a skimp black dress; instead of kneeling proudly by the side of her chosen husband, in the sight of all these people, she shrank in an obscure corner, scarcely daring to mourn her lost happiness, lest she should be noticed, and her shame become known.

And yet she wanted to see Maxime: was he thinking also that this should have been his wedding-day?—would he not, before this crowd, guessing her presence, come toward her with open arms, and call out, as he had once done—"She was given to me as my wife; as such I claim her!" Alas! even as she dreamed this dream, she knew full well that if by some chance he were to see her in her beggar garb, he would turn from her, ashamed, and pretend that he knew her not.

The ceremony had begun. All eyes were fixed on the wedding party, where each one had found an assigned place. Then Marca also ventured to look. The chapel was raised a little above the body of the church, so that she saw quite well. She scarcely glanced at the principal actors of the scene; she immediately singled out Maxime in the family group. She thought he looked a little pale; and immediately her heart melted. Surely he too remembered.

The stout Baronne Amélie seemed stouter than ever, in violet silk. Marca sought eagerly among the other fine ladies, but Olga was not there. Then she noticed her little friend Claire, who seemed more moved than her sister; she was bridesmaid, and she wore a pretty light-blue dress, like the other bridesmaid, whom Marca did not know; a relative of the happy husband, doubtless. She noticed all these things; then quickly her wandering eyes were once more fixed on Maxime's face.

The customary sermon seemed terribly long to Marca; then, after, came the inevitable *quête*, —for the principal use of bridesmaids in French marriages is to carry the collection-bag from row to row, escorted by the groomsmen and preceded by the beadle. Marca had not thought of this ceremony. She waited, trembling, to find out which of the two bridesmaids was to come on her side. Should it be the unknown girl, she was safe; but what if it were Claire, and she should recognize her? She determined to hide her face, and make no sign; Claire would pass by, never guessing her presence.

And it was her friend who directed her steps on the side of the church where she found herself. When the young girl, whose fingers were held by a white-gloved youth, came close to her, Marca was seized with such a hungry longing for a look, a word of pity, that she forgot all prudence. The beadle, striking the marble pavement with his big stick, made way for the *quêteuse*, repeating his monotonous "*Pour l'église, s'il vous plaît!*" and Claire, blushing and sweet-looking, at every offering which fell in her red velvet bag said a low "*merci.*" Then at last she reached the side chapel where Marca knelt alone, and the poor girl lifted her head and fixed her sad eyes on her friend's.

"Marca!" The cry was a smothered one; but there was a moment's delay, which astonished the white-gloved youth, and caused the beadle to look around.

"Let your bag fall," whispered Marca. Claire understood, and, pretending to stumble, sent the bag and its contents rolling on the ground. This caused quite a little hub-bub. The grave beadle knelt to pick up the rolling coppers and silver pieces. In the midst of this confusion no one noticed that a shabby young person in black helped to pick up the money, and spoke low and fast to Claire.

"Marca, for God's sake tell me where I may find you — what I may do for you!"

"What can you do, my poor Claire? Do you think your mother would allow you to approach me? I ought to have let you pass; but I so wanted to say to you, dear, that I love you still. Ah! it is sad to be all alone in the world when one is eighteen years of age."

"Marca — my darling — I love you; I have so often cried over your misfortunes. But Maxime told me that you were cared for — that you were not unhappy. I do not believe it now."

"Maxime was right; I am not in want — I work for my living; soon I shall leave France forever. Kiss me, dear — no one will see you; — now go, they are waiting for you!"

"Maxime will take me to see you; I mean to beg so hard!"

She was forced to go. The majestic beadle was handing her the velvet bag, with its recovered contents; many curious looks were directed toward the young girl, whose mother from her place half dislocated her neck to discover the cause of this unusual bustle; and so, with a last look of pitying affection, the good little girl went her way, forgetting to say her "*merci*" to the alms-givers.

It was not till some time later that Claire managed to attract Maxime's attention, without exciting her watchful mother's suspicion. The wedding party stood in a formal row against the sacristy's wall, receiving the congratulations of the crowd which passed out of the church that way. Claire stood at a little distance from the calm bride; she at last was able to whisper in Maxime's ear:

"Quick! — do not lose a moment! — in the second chapel to the right you will find Marca; she is heart-broken, and very poor. You cannot let the girl who was to-day to have been your wife die of starvation! Go!"

Maxime grew very pale. There were moments when he still loved Marca ; but he was terribly afraid of some sort of "scene" in a crowd. However he slipped away, and hurried to the chapel. Marca had disappeared. He scarcely knew whether he was relieved or disappointed.

Still he so tormented Madame de Vignon with his questions that at last she told him she had been forced to dismiss the governess because the count was madly in love with her; and that she had no idea what had become of the girl.

Maxime was decidedly cross during the wedding reception; and this was much commented upon. All these people knew that it was to have been his wedding-day, as well as his sister's; and Marca was more alluded to than she had been for a long time past. Public opinion was fast changing, and the Schneefeld family were greatly blamed. It is possible that the girl had been in the wrong; but a greater wrong was to abandon a child of eighteen in the midst of a great city like Paris.

CHAPTER XX.

A WHOLE weary month passed, and no letter from America came to cheer Marca. Then she persuaded herself that her friend's family had doubtless changed their residence, and that her letter was following them. The name was so well known that it was impossible the letter should not finally reach its destination. She would not — she could not — think otherwise; it would be madness, death, to her. School friendships are often forgotten, but she felt sure of her old schoolmate's heart; she never doubted the ultimate result of her appeal. Only, waiting from day to day was very hard. Each morning she ventured a timid "Is there nothing for me?— no letter from America?" until the portress impatiently told her that she was in the habit of delivering the lodgers' letters, even to those who did not pay their rent. Poor Marca dared say no more; she owed her month's rent and could not pay it.

Sometimes Pierre and she would meet on the staircase; but there could be but little intercourse now between them. The young man had grown very gloomy. Still, his love was not conquered, and if the girl had lifted her tear-filled eyes imploringly to his, all his evil thoughts, all his hardness, would have disappeared like mist before the sun. Even without this appeal, remembering his unspoken promise to Madame Langlois, he did his best to help her; but he was awkward in his attempts, and she would accept nothing. She assured him that she had found work, and showed him some rough linen which she was to make up for one of the large shops. He saw that she was pale, and that her step had lost its springing elasticity; but she would smile gently as she answered his questions, and he dared not insist. Then, invariably, he asked fiercely whether she had received news from America; and when she said she had not, but doubtless the letter would soon come, his heart beat violently with a wild hope: utter want might at last throw her into his arms. And so he, too, waited.

The work which Marca had at last found gave her just enough to keep her literally from starving. She was inexperienced, and wanted to do it too well; so that the task seemed never-ending. And even thus, with twelve hours of work, she could not earn enough to pay for more than her daily bread. In a few days she would owe two months' rent. How was this all to end? Then she remembered that Mr. Nariskine, even before he fell in love with her, had treated her with kind consideration. She would go to him; he was generous and manly; he would never think of taking any advantage of her destitute situation. One day she went, hoping to see him, but his studio was shut; letters and cards heaped up were waiting for him in the porter's lodge. The last address he had given was Rome; but he had sent word that he was on the point of leaving that city, and that nothing was to be forwarded until he had given a new address. Marca wrote a few words, and begged to have the note sent to him with the rest, as soon as possible.

Every hope thus crumbled away. She wondered that she should still live on. But each day hunger assailed her, and each night she slept. Youth is so full of life! — longing for death does not bring it always. Yet she suffered greatly, especially from the cold; her attic was terribly exposed, and the water froze more than once in her pitcher. Sometimes, from sheer cold, she would creep to bed long before night came. From her window, as she worked, she could see Maxime's dainty bachelor quarters; sometimes in the evening the windows gleamed with the light from within, and the sound of music came softly to her ears. She thought of him continually; it was madness,— but, from her many privations, she felt herself grow weak, morally as well as physically. She still had sufficient self-respect to avoid him with such care that he had not guessed her presence; but beyond that, she allowed herself the one luxury left her. She was cold and hungry and weary; but she could still sometimes catch a glimpse of her lover as he crossed the court beneath; — she could still think of him by day, dream of him by night. What law could deprive her of that last comfort?

One day, as she took back a parcel of work, she was told that her services were no longer required. She stood stunned, half stupid, looking at the coppers just handed to her. No more work? . . . Then what was to become of her?

She knew that it was useless to remonstrate, and she turned away. As she left the shop she met Maxime face to face.

She had avoided him with such care, only to meet him thus stupidly in the midst of a crowd. She trembled, and grew very faint.

"Marca — my little Marca! For God's sake look at me! speak to me! Am I not your cousin, almost your brother? Have I no right to help you? If you knew what remorse I feel when I sit down to my dainty meals, to think that you perhaps are in want! I have never ceased to love you, my darling; they want me to marry a rich girl — but I refuse, for I love but you. Let me take you somewhere, and get you some warm clothes. You are cold, I know. . . . And the lady who adopted you?"

"She is dead."

"Then how do you live?"

"I work — see, I have just been paid," and she showed him the handful of coppers.

"Where do you live?"

"From my window I see you pass. My attic looks down upon your house."

"Marca! . . . And I never guessed it!"

"I watch your departure before venturing out."

"You no longer love me, then!"

"You mistake; I love you madly, and that is why we must never meet. Some one — a workman — who wishes me to be his wife, knows that I love you; were he to see us together my reputation would be lost. . . . I must go. Farewell."

"You shall not go!"

"Do you wish a street scandal? What would your fine friends say, were they to see you in such poor company?"

"I have the right to save you in spite of yourself. I shall go and find you in your attic!"

"My door is always locked. I should scream, and Pierre would come to my rescue."

"Who is this Pierre?"

"A noble fellow. If I had not been mad I should have loved him. I belong to his class, after all, not to yours. Farewell!"

She had slipped away. But this did not trouble him, now that he knew where to find her. Laure had returned from her wedding trip; she was not bad-hearted, and she was no longer under their mother's control; she should go with him to Marca's attic. Together they would save her; she could not refuse a woman's help, when that woman had been almost a cousin.

He ran to his sister's house. Laure was out, and was not expected home until late.

"To-morrow will be time enough," thought Maxime. The effort he had made to help Marca had quieted his conscience ; and he sauntered away well satisfied with himself.

Marca forgot to buy some bread. Other thoughts filled her brain. As she was passing in, the portress stopped her.

"You owe two months' rent to-day, and if you have not paid it before to-morrow morning the proprietor requests you to leave ; your furniture will barely pay your debt."

"Here ! " and she put down all the money she held in her hand. The woman counted out fifteen sous.

"What am I to do with that? You are joking ! "

"It is all I have," sobbed the poor child.

"Well, then, to-morrow your room will be let. It is not my fault," she said, seeing the girl's despair. "Shall I speak to Pierre about it ? "

"No — no ! "

"I saw that you were no longer good friends; that is why I have not spoken to him on the matter — for, after all, you know he has to work hard to keep his own head above water. . . . And then a pretty girl like you need never want long."

It was not the first time Marca heard such insinuations ; they had come to her from the work-rooms, from the streets where she walked fast for fear of being stopped. She tottered away, saying quickly:

"I am going to look for work!"

She felt very weak. Early that morning she had eaten a little bread left over from the day before; since then, nothing. She did not feel hungry, only she trembled as she walked.

Night was coming on as she ended her sad pilgrimage. Everywhere she received the same answer: The season was so far advanced that there was no longer an absolute need of help, and only well-recommended workwomen were employed. She still walked on; but her thoughts were strangely wild. She felt quite ill. At last, worn out, she let herself fall on a bench. She found herself on the boulevard, just opposite a famous restaurant. The smell of cooking came to her from the kitchen, which was below the level of the street. Through the immense plate-glass windows she saw the rows of well-served little tables, with glistening glass and silver, and stiff shiny napkins folded in odd shapes, each holding its small loaf; red shrimps and tiny radishes gave a pretty glow of color among the white of the linen and china. Waiters hurried here and there; gentlemen came and sat down at the tempting tables, carelessly unfolding the napkins. And she, who was dying of hunger, watched all this with intense interest, as though she were seeing some wonderful play. She was unable to reason about it all; her poor head whirled too much for thought, and red clouds passed before her eyes. Hunger had become a veritable torture. For weeks past she had not eaten what health required ; for days past she had lived on a little bread — nothing more.

And her poor little mother had died almost happy, saying, " At least she will never know what real hunger is ! "

At last she understood that she could not remain longer on the bench. People stared at her, and the evening had closed in upon her. Happy couples brushed past her, hurrying to the different theatres. The boulevard was brilliant with gas-jets, and the magnificent shops threw great floods of light out upon the pavement. She shrank away; she would have liked to hide in some dark corner, where no one should see her. Then she remembered her little, cold, silent room, and wished herself there;— she was not to be sent away until to-morrow; it would be good to sleep a few hours . . . ah, if she could sleep forever ! She had heard stories of people dying of hunger in obscure attics, while the noise and bustle of a magnificent city went on around.

She was so weak that it took her a long time to reach the tall dismal house. As she dragged herself in, she heard the portress scream out in her harsh voice:

" You know, if you have not paid your debt to-morrow, you are to be turned out; the proprietor said so again to-day ! "

She did not answer, but crawled past, leaning against the wall for support.

Then suddenly she felt herself lifted up in two strong arms, and Maxime's voice was in her ears. She let herself go, never even thinking of screaming, of making the slightest resistance. All her strength, all her pride, had left her.

"I heard what that woman said; they want to send you away — let them. You have done your very best, my poor darling; you have struggled, but the fight has been too much for you. You were so ill-prepared for it! — you who have been living like a princess."

"I am hungry," muttered Marca.

"Come — you shall eat, you shall warm yourself by a blazing fire. Fear nothing; my servant has gone; a cold supper is all prepared — I was to have brought in some friends after the theatre. Come!"

"But, Maxime, you know that I cannot — that I dare not!" said the poor girl. "Do you not see that I love you? — and that is why you must let me go."

"Listen to me, my darling; listen; try and understand. Do you think me an absolute wretch? Can you imagine that I could take advantage of your desolation? — make a profit out of your misery? You shall leave me when you like. I love you dearly — more, far more, than I ever guessed; but a girl half dying of fatigue and cold and want is sacred in my eyes.

Let me be your cousin — your brother — for this once; let me care for you — comfort you. You shall be as safe by my fireside as in your cold attic."

"I am so hungry — so very hungry," she repeated, scarcely knowing what she was saying. "You know, Maxime, I showed you some pennies I have earned. I gave them all to the portress; not thinking that to live one must eat. Since then, I have been wandering in search of work, but I found none. I have been walking ever since. I am so tired — so very tired."

By way of answer he lifted her up and carried her like a sick child. Once before he had held her thus in his arms, half dead,— and he had saved her. He would save her this time also.

. . . .

It was very late when Pierre, weary with work, came home. The moon, an old, waning moon, threw its yellowish rays on the sleeping place. There was no light save in the little house yonder. He stopped a moment, smiling ironically, as he thought that Marca still loved a man who so gaily forgot her. As he looked, the door opened quietly; he shrank in the shadow, so as to see who, at such an hour, could thus mysteriously slip away. As he expected, the figure which quietly glided along was a female form. Ah! if Marca could but see what he saw!

The woman crossed a space lighted by the moon. Then his heart seemed to stop beating; for he had recognized Marca.

She was quite close to him when he abruptly left his hiding-place and stood before her in the lighted space. They looked at each other for a few moments in terrible silence; at last Marca said:

"Pierre!—Pierre!—what you think is not true: I swear by all that is dear and sacred to us both, it is not true!"

But the words died on her lips; she saw that he did not believe her.

"You choose a singular time for a friendly visit. It is two o'clock in the morning."

"Listen to me!"

"Why should I? You would lie again as you have just lied. . . . And to think that I worshipped her — that I would have thought it a crime to sully her purity with a word — a look! — that I wished her to be my honored wife! . . . Go! — Do you hear? — Go! I am but a rude workman, and violent."

"I was dying of hunger — of cold. He made me eat, he warmed me at his fireside. He wept to see me so ill and weak; and when I asked to go he silently opened the door. To-morrow his sister is to come for me; my troubles are at an end. If I had done any wrong, would he bring his sister to me?"

"You lie!— you lie!"

She could find nothing further to say, and remained silent in the cold moonlight, lifting up her innocent eyes to his. If he would not believe her she could not help it.

"Let me pass, Pierre. You used to be very good to me; you will be good now, will you not? The day will come when you will say, 'I was very hard on her; I would not believe her — yet now I think she told the truth.'"

"You were hungry; I was there,— why did you not call me? I will tell you; you would accept nothing from me, lest some day I should say once more, 'Be my wife.' And you prefer to be that profligate's mistress rather than the wife of an honest fellow whom you had seen in a workman's dress."

She was greatly frightened. She tried to scream, but the sound stopped in her throat. He saw her terror, and suddenly all his violence left him.

"Poor child!" he muttered, "poor little girl! I will not hurt you — only I want you to understand the truth. You say that you have done no harm — it may be true; but to-morrow — but later? It is inevitable. You love him, and he loves you — after a fashion. You accept his protection, his aid; and men of his kind give nothing without return. He will not marry you — you know that as well as I; well, then,— you see that your fall is certain."

Then he left her — hurriedly, fearing a return of his violence, perhaps.

Marca did not move. She was horribly pale. Pierre's words echoed in her ears with a formidable sound. She knew that it was all true. She had deceived herself, because she longed to do so. Maxime had wept at her feet; he had been gentle and respectful; — he could afford to wait. Laure would never come to her — she knew that it could not be. Then, suddenly, she heard her godmother's last words: "Fool! you care for her — keep her. She is of the tribe to whom one need never offer a marriage ring!"

And Pierre had said that it was inevitable.

Her head whirled; she was frightened; fever was upon her. She wanted to fly — to go far, very far away, where Maxime should never find her, where she could die alone. "My God," she murmured, "My God, I want to do right — you know that I only want to do right!"

A belated lodger was ringing violently at the bell, when at last the heavy door opened. Marca slipped out into the street, scarcely knowing what she was doing.

She sped along very quickly, going — she knew not where. Fever raged in her veins; she was a little delirious, yet she kept enough presence of mind to avoid the few foot-passers. She went faster and faster; once, some one tried to stop her, but she slipped away, and hurried on. It was very dark. The late moon was disappearing among black clouds; the shiver of early morning made itself felt. Still Marca pursued her way. She knew that she was leaving the great city behind her; there were fewer houses and more trees about her. Presently she heard a sound she well knew, for she had heard it during her short summer of happiness — far away in the country, where it was warm, and laughing groups rested beneath the willow shade: the sound of the rushing river. She almost smiled with pleasure, as at the meeting of some dear friend; with the gurgle, bits of conversation came to her as well:

"I shall always love the river, which threw you into my arms."

She remembered that she had been carried away by the waters, and that it had not hurt her much; Maxime had saved her.

She drew near to the edge; the river called to her; besides, the fever which was now raging violently, which blurred all her thoughts, gave her also a great thirst; — it would be so pleasant to drink, and to bathe her burning head.

The morning dawned, very cold, very sad. She was at quite a distance from Paris; country-houses and pretty gardens were vaguely visible in the uncertain light. She had found a small path which led down to the water's edge. She was very tired — quite worn out. She sat down on a stone, saying to herself that she was very ill, and wondering what would become of her — but without caring much.

Then once more her thoughts became wildly incoherent. She fancied that she was still at the Baronne Olga's country-place; quite distinctly she heard the voices of Laure and Claire, as they swam in the river; then Maxime's gay call came to her ear. . . . She must go to him. The fever heat was intolerable; she must have a little water. She bent down — lower — lower; the coolness of the water fascinated her; a little lower still . . . and then she let herself go — fainting away into death.

THE END.

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